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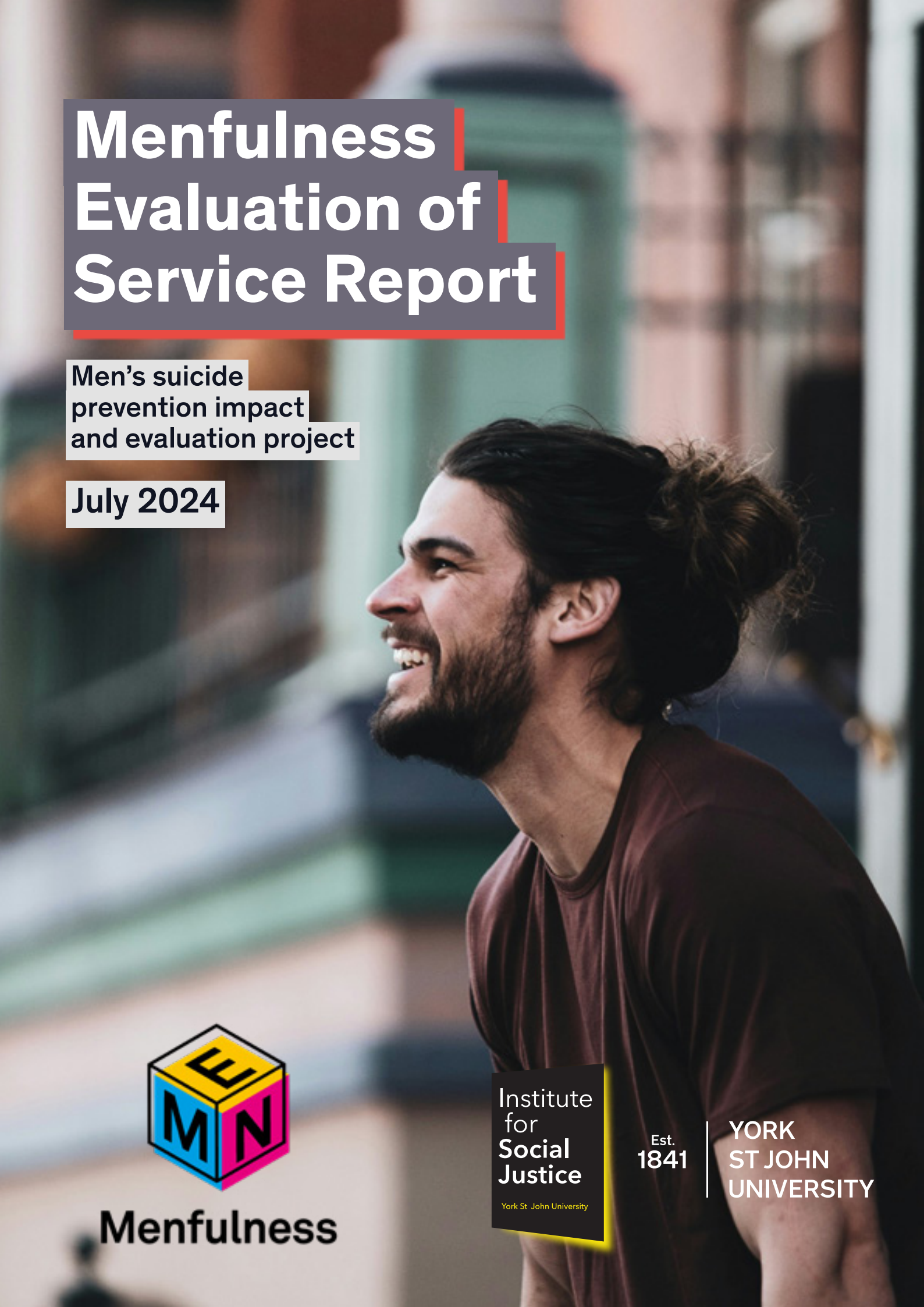
Menfulness Evaluation of Service Report

Men's suicide prevention impact and evaluation project

July 2024



Menfulness

Institute for Social Justice
York St John University

Est. 1841
YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

We are very proud to present the findings of the Menfulness co-participatory Evaluation of Service project carried out between October 2023 and July 2024. The research team were drawn from York St John and the Menfulness charity and were Dr Gary Shepherd (Research Lead), Holly Murphy (Research Assistant & Postgraduate student), Jack Woodhams (Menfulness founder and Trustee) and Sam Watling (Menfulness Trustee).

Our project task was both simple and complex, in the first instance we were to evaluate how Menfulness delivered their services in relation to The Samaritans (2021) Engaging men earlier: a guide to service design* recommendations. Our second task was to attempt to take a look "under the hood" of the charity in an attempt to capture some of the ways in which Menfulness improved men's mental health and reduced suicidality.

As part of our evaluation, we gathered over 250 service user responses to a Qualtrics survey. This helped create a demographic picture of the men using the service in terms of their age, occupation, geographic location and the services they used. The survey asked members a number of 'before' and 'after' joining Menfulness questions exploring how they connected with other men, their help seeking behaviours, the likelihood of using counselling services and their overall mental health.

We also carried out a number of face-to-face and focus group interviews with member. For our face-to-face interviews we spoke to men who listened to The Menfulness Podcast series about what benefit they received from listening to the podcast. We are delighted to report this study has recently been published in the journal Mental Health & Prevention**. Along with this work we also spoke to three volunteers about their experiences and include a Case Study detailing one man's journey from being an ordinary Menfulness member to volunteering, organising and running their own Menfulness group.

We interviewed a number of members in focus group settings and spoke to a cross section of men from the Knights talk group, the Breakfast club, the Retro Games group and the Social Football group. These interviews helped us understand how the Menfulness service mapped onto the Samaritans best practice recommendations and provided insight into how the Menfulness culture permeates throughout the charity.

We have introduced short 'insight' paragraphs in a number of sections of this report to help give the quantitative and qualitative data context. These insights, when considered as a whole have helped us reflect on how the Menfulness charity encourages positive mental wellbeing whilst helping reduce suicide impulses within the membership.

The research team would like to thank all the Menfulness members, Trustees, volunteers and interviewees who contributed their time and energy to this research project. Thanks too must go to Professor Matthew Reason for his support and belief in the project along with Vicki Pugh who helped support and navigate us through the project administration. Special thanks go to Holly, Sam and Jack for your resilience, perseverance and collegiality in what has been both an exciting and challenging project.

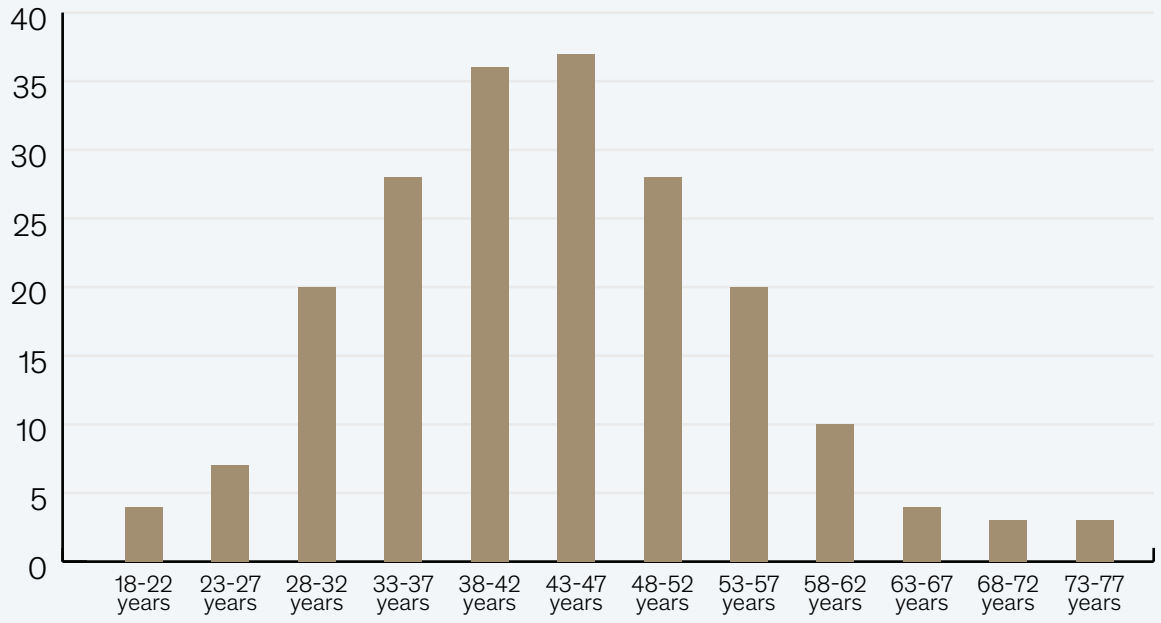
*Available at: https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/research-policy/middle-aged-men-suicide/engaging-men-earlier/

**" Murphy, H., Watling, S., Woodhams, J. and Shepherd, G., (2024). What do men gain from listening to men's mental health podcast episodes?. Mental Health & Prevention, p.200347.

Executive Summary

- Menfulness attracts members from nationally recognised 'at risk' age groups. These age groups often contain men who feel a stigma and shame around seeking help or who have strong masculine character traits and hold beliefs that mental ill health is a weakness and should be managed alone.
- Participants actively engage with Menfulness through a number of online platforms and offline events. This diverse engagement underscores the organizations ability to connect with members across multiple platforms and activity types.
- Postcode data suggests many members live on the outskirts of the city of York in demographically 'comfortable' neighbourhoods
- Substantial qualitative research focused on mapping the effectiveness of Menfulness services against the Samaritans 'five principles'.
- A strength of the charity is the range of communication channels they utilise to both spread awareness of offline activities and help members connect with one another pre and post event.
- A surprising finding of the Samaritans' mapping exercise was when we asked men their views on how Menfulness helps fostering a sense of achievement and how the charity helps them achieve their personal goals.
- Men told us that goals and target setting reminded them too much of the pressures they often experienced in their work or home life, which they did not need reminding of in group activities.
- The podcasts are a great way for men to begin the process of reflection on their own attitudes and behaviours and question what it means to be a man.
- Trustees see a great value in the process of reflecting on experience and questioning men's internal processes, which is the key to new learning and to eventually behavioural change.
- Trustees encourage men to become proactive and take their mental wellbeing seriously. This may take the form of men speaking about their mental health to their peers, discussing their issues with a family member or visiting the GP or a counsellor to ask for help and advice.
- This pragmatic approach to mental health management helps members understand the normality of mental health struggles and how anxiety and depressive symptoms can be reduced.
- There is a real honesty in the Talk group where men are free to express some very deep feelings and disclose often very private thoughts and ideas.
- The Breakfast club seems a much less intense experience than the Talk group with men feeling much more relaxed, with less of a structure to their conversations.
- Men attending the Retro Games night seem to be more attracted to being with like-minded people within a social setting.
- The Social Football group shatters the assumptions that playing amateur football needs to be a highly competitive, tremendously serious and unforgiving pastime.
- The offline groups provide examples of the range of activities on offer to Menfulness members and the differing levels of emotional depth and social connections the activities provide.
- These activities seem to form a natural continuum of support. On one hand talk-based groups offer a depth of intensity and honesty which some men crave as they can be highly transformative.
- On the other hand, activity-based groups offer a different level of connection and intimacy, depending on how prepared and comfortable men are to engage with others.
- It is plain that engagement with a range of social media seems to be vitally important for the success of the charity.
- Our research suggests the primary benefits for men in a male-only group are feeling understood and accepted.
- Statistics indicate that membership of the Menfulness charity may actually improve male help seeking.
- Since becoming involved with the Menfulness community, the number of participants who would be extremely unlikely to seek counselling or therapy decreased to 3% and the number of participants who would be extremely likely to seek counselling or therapy increased to 70%.
- Since becoming involved with Menfulness there have been notable changes in communication patterns, with the number of participants who would not seek out other men to discuss things that bothered them decreasing to 16% and men who found it easy to speak to other men about things that bothered them increasing to 47%.
- Since becoming members of Menfulness, there seems to have been significant improvements in men's mental health: the number of participants reporting poor mental health decreased to 3%, only 5% continued to experience low mood, reports of frequent anger dropped to 0.85% and notably, no men reported they had attempted to take their own life.

Demographics



Median age of Menfulness Members

Age

The survey data revealed a wide age range among Menfulness members, from 18 to 77 years old. Notably, the most prevalent age group representing 19% of the dataset was the 43-47 years old group, closely followed by the 38-42 years old cohort making up 18% of the data. Equally represented in the survey were individuals aged between 33-37 and 48-52 years old representing 14% of the data.

Insight: Menfulness attracts members from nationally recognised 'at risk' age groups. These age groups often contain men who feel a stigma and shame around seeking help or who have strong masculine character traits and hold beliefs that mental ill health is a weakness and should be managed alone. According to the Office for National Statistics* around three-quarters of suicides registered in 2022 were males (4,179 deaths; 74.1%), equivalent to 16.4 deaths per 100,000. In 2022 men aged 45 to 49 years had the second highest suicide rate (23 deaths per 100,000). Alongside this, men aged 45 to 64 years have the highest rates of suicide for this broad age group since 2010 (20.4 deaths per 100,000 in 2022).

*https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2022registrations

Employment

This data is based on responses from 190 participants and shows the majority of respondents have managerial type occupations indicating members may earn a mid-level salaries and have 'people management' responsibilities. 44 participants (23%) were managers, 24 (13%) were employed by the construction or engineering sectors and 19 (10%) were self-employed.

Insight: The employment data suggests Menfulness members may be familiar with organising other people or taking on responsibilities within their working roles. This may suggest members in York may be more 'group minded' and familiar with the experience of structure in their lives.

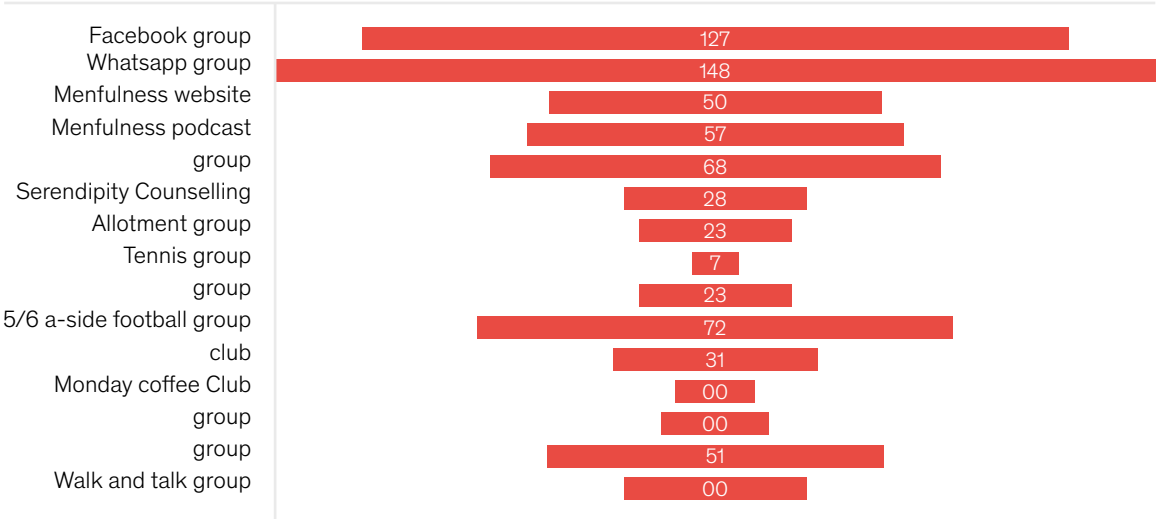
Engagement

Participants demonstrated significant engagement across Menfulness' online spaces. 148 respondents reported participation in the Menfulness WhatsApp group and 127 respondents indicated engagement with Menfulness' Facebook pages.

Offline activities also saw considerable participation among respondents. The most popular offline activity was 5/6 a-side football groups, used by 72 respondents and the Knights Talking Group, used by 68 respondents.

Insight: The data illustrates participants are actively engaging with Menfulness through a number of online platforms and offline events. This diverse engagement underscores the organization's ability to connect with members across multiple platforms and activities.

How men engaged with Menfulness



Geographic area

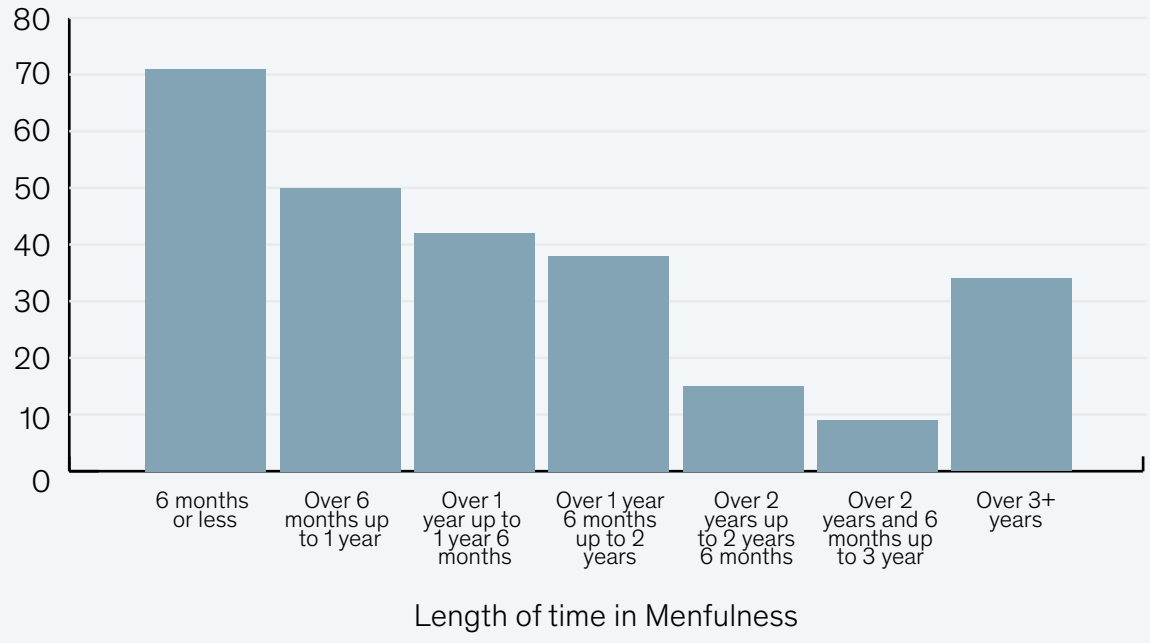
Postcode data shows most respondents reside in the YO32 area, with 17.1% of members living there. This area includes Haxby, Huntington (North), Wigginton, New Earswick, Stockton-on-the-Forest and Strensall. The second most popular area is the YO24 postcode area, with 15% of Menfulness members. This area includes Acomb, Dringhouses and Woodthorpe. The third most popular area for respondents to reside is the YO31 postcode area with 13.5% of participants residing there. This area includes Heworth, Huntington (South), The Groves and Layerthorpe.

Insight: The postcode data suggests many members live on the outskirts of the city of York in demographically 'comfortable' neighbourhoods. Although there are members living in postcode areas classified as financially struggling, this group do not make up the largest proportion of the membership.

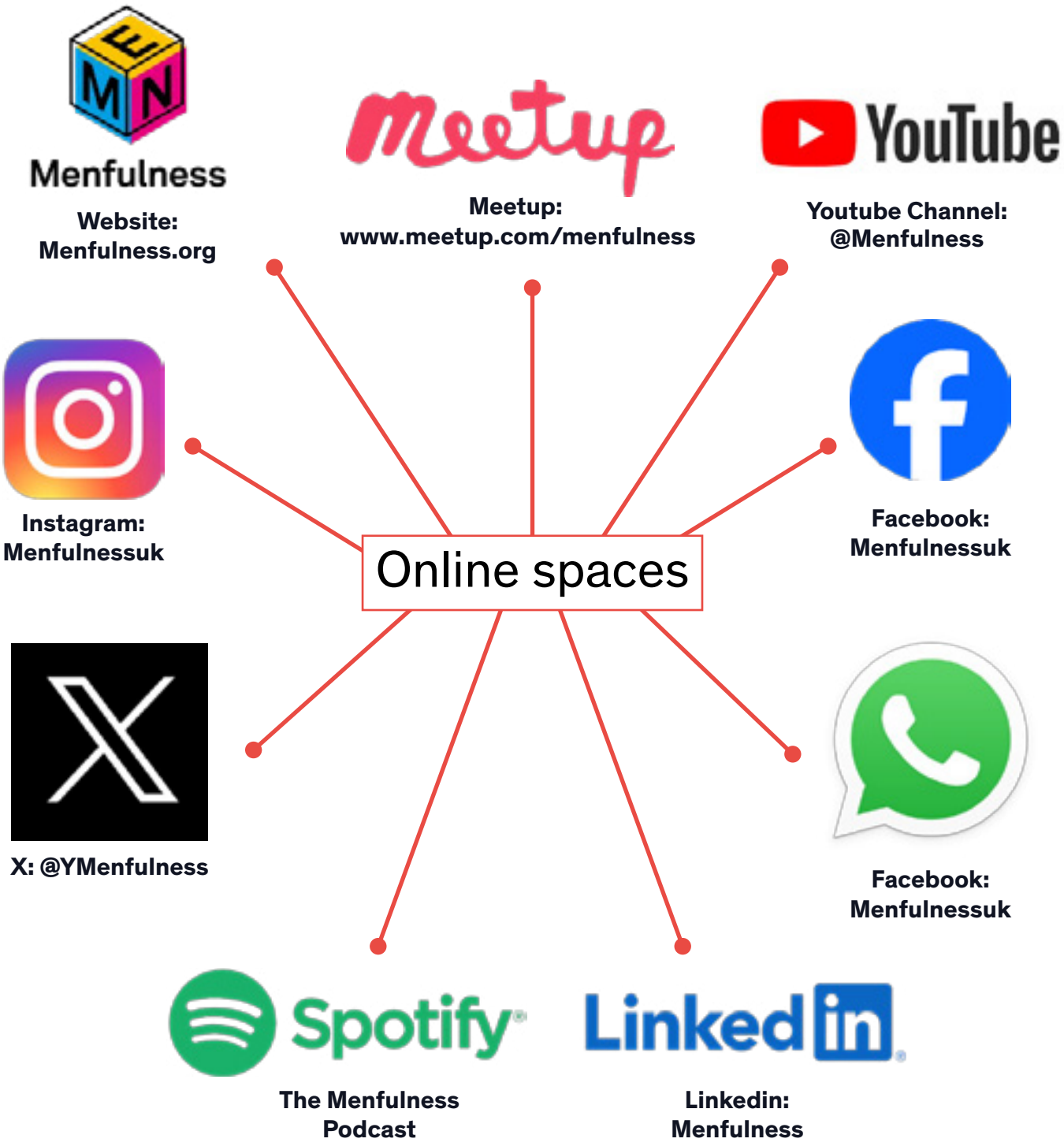
Length of membership

From 282 respondents 138 individuals (53%) have been members of Menfulness for over a year. 71 participants (27%) have been involved with Menfulness for six months or less.

Insight: This suggests the service is experiencing ongoing growth and successfully attracting new members. The results also indicate a strong ability to maintain member engagement over an extended period of time.



Services map



Services map

Knights talk group
#DontManUpSpeakUp

Yorkey Dads Hair School

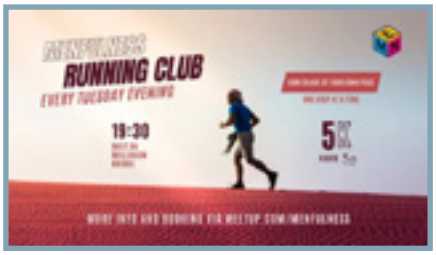
Social Football #MenfulnessFooty

Coffee with Chris – Social drop in

Breakfast Club

Offline spaces

Allotment – Together We Grow



Running Club

Boxing Fitness

Walk & Talk

The Board Room – A Fun Night of Games and Conversation

Retro Games Night

#RallyTogether Free Tennis Coaching

Samaritans service design evaluation

The Samaritans (2021) conducted research to understand how to effectively engage less well-off men in wellbeing initiatives before they reached crisis point. Researchers interviewed men aged from 30-59 years old, earning below the median income level and classified as 'just getting by'.

Each respondent had experienced some of the following 'risk factors' over the previous five years:

- Were not working/had experienced job loss
- Suffered a downward trajectory in their career
- Lost touch with friends and family
- Experienced relationship breakdown
- Undertook increasing substance misuse
- Stopped taking part in activities
- Suffered worsening physical health

Findings were compiled in the handbook Engaging Men Earlier: A Guide to Service Design (2021). The research involved co-design workshops with 27 less well-off men from the UK and the Republic of Ireland, where they explored activities and initiatives that could support men's wellbeing pre-emptively. This process led to the development of five key principles recommended for services to help ensure initiatives were in line with their respondent's needs.

The Samaritan's outline five key principles for successful men's wellbeing services:

- Use activities to facilitate conversation
- Be welcoming and accessible
- Communicate clearly
- Foster meaningful relationships over time
- Foster a sense of achievement

The research revealed a one-size-fits-all approach to be ineffective, as men often do not gravitate towards stereotypically 'male' activities. Instead, men's preferences are shaped by individual life experiences, with preference for hobby-based activities that address general wellbeing needs over formal mental health or crisis related activities.

Our research team carried out a number of projects to map Menfulness activities against the five principles. We analysed content from the Menfulness website, individual Menfulness WhatsApp channels, electronic information on the 'Meetup' platform, Menfulness LinkedIn content and traditional paper based promotional materials. We also interviewed Menfulness volunteers and podcast listeners. We carried out a number of focus group interviews with members of the Knights talk group, the Breakfast Club, the Retro Games group and the Social Football group.

Samaritans (2021). Engaging men earlier: a guide to service design, Surrey, The Samaritans. Available at https://media.samaritans.org/documents/Samaritans_Handbook_for_mens_wellbeing_services_2021.pdf, [accessed 27/6/2024]

Key principle 1: Use activities to facilitate conversation

The Samaritans service recommendations suggest to engage participants and keep them engaged, wellbeing initiatives should:

- **Consider framing promotional materials and early engagement around activities.**

A strength of the Menfulness service is that it offers a diverse range of activities to its members. Many of these are task oriented such as videogaming, football, gardening, running and walking groups. Menfulness also provides a number of talking based group specifically designed to give men the opportunity to speak to one another.

- **Make only subtle implications or references to socialising in advertising materials.**

References to socialising are minimal in advertising materials with some suggestion that the opportunity to further socialise is available if men would like to do so.

- **Consider how activities and goals related to activities can be used to encourage conversation.**

Menfulness have a real talent for bringing men together for activity-based events which naturally encourage conversation and openness.

The Samaritans service recommendations checklist asks:

How are activities being used to facilitate conversation?

Menfulness run a number of talking groups dedicated to providing a space for meaningful conversation. In groups which are more task-focused such as the football or running groups, there is a dedicated WhatsApp channel to help men connect away from the activity if they wish.

Are there opportunities for participants to talk casually before, during or after the activity?

All activities Menfulness promote have a clear venue where men meet prior and post the group event. During most activities men are encouraged to chat to one another if they wish. An example of this is at the football group where players meet at a local sports club before the game. During the game there are always two non-players standing on the side-lines. This provides opportunities for discussion if players choose to substitute themselves to engage in conversation.

Do promotional materials make the activity clear?

Promotional materials make activities clear in both written and graphical forms.

Quotes from promotional materials:

"The squash club have kindly opened their bar to us too so you can go up and have a drink and a natter after your game if you fancy. No pressure, no expectations, just come down, have fun talk, listen and feel better for it!"

"There's an opportunity for a coffee, soft drink maybe even a beer post run too!"

"[Volunteer] is a qualified counsellor, but there's no pressure or expectations, just come down, have fun talk, listen and feel better for it! We can't solve all your problems fellas but you don't have to face them alone."

Key principle 2: Be welcoming and accessible

The Samaritans service recommendations state that to engage participants, wellbeing initiatives should:

- **Prioritise ensuring that the first contact with a participant is a really positive one. This could be by having someone to meet and greet participants and introduce them to others.**

Designated volunteers are responsible for greeting new participants and introducing them to the rest of the group.

- **Provide taster sessions and trial periods for beginners and use language around 'giving it a go' to lessen any possible pressure.**

New participants can book on to try a session before becoming more involved in the group if they wish. It is not necessary for new participants to commit to a certain number of sessions.

- **Ensure posters and campaign ads come across as fun, playful, irreverent and friendly.**

Menfulness promote a culture of openness, inclusivity and friendliness which runs through their promotional materials.

- **Provide drop-in rates and the ability to 'freeze' membership.**

Menfulness do not charge a membership fee and provides either free activities or activities with a suggested donation level.

- **Allow a low financial and time commitment to start with.**

Menfulness does not charge for its services and does not require any level of commitment from group members. Sessions are very much based on a 'drop-in' model. This approach reduces anxiety around committing time and money to activities and events.

The Samaritans service recommendations checklist asks:

Have you considered the necessary basic skills participants will need to take part?

Participants of mixed abilities are welcomed in groups. Where basic skills are required for safety reasons, volunteers provide beginners groups.

How will participants be greeted and introduced to other group members?

Menfulness believe this is a key element of their service which links to their values of being open and inclusive to all men attending their groups. A designated volunteer at each activity greets new members and introduces them to other participants.

How easy is it for participants to 'give it a go'? Do you have taster sessions or trial periods?

Participants are encouraged to book on to activities and try them without obligation of further commitment.

Participant quotes:

"You know, it's like that. So, I was just kind of walking in thinking I don't know what I'm doing here. I'll just start, give it a try. You know, I thought whatever really was people like [volunteer] just kind of welcomed me in and then I start to slowly realize, 'actually, I'm OK to talk about this and not feel judged for it'."

"We're walking into a group of people and you kind of assume everyone knows each other from football or something and those relationships are there. It can be quite hard to walk in, but everybody is brilliant and friendly and accommodating. I think they recognize there's like some people who are not that outgoing. I mean, as a lifelong introvert, you get that. And a lot of extroverts don't understand the fact that you're fighting all the time. You need somebody who's quite switched on, like [trustee/volunteer], who recognizes that in people and then creates that bridge into the group."

"There's not the same people every week, it's like 50% the same people. When I first started coming down, I was worried that I was going to turn up to 15 people that all played football with each other and all knew each other and then I was just a random. I wasn't very good, and I knew it, but I just sort of wanted a friendly that I could try and learn [at] and I came down and straight away, you know, two people came up to me and introduced themselves and then introduced me to everyone else."

Key principle 3: Communicate clearly

The Samaritans service recommendations state that to engage participants, wellbeing initiatives should:

- **Where appropriate, provide a structure, agenda or idea of what is to come ahead of the first interaction with a participant. This will help to alleviate anxiety about starting something new and meeting new people.**

Menfulness provide detailed descriptions of what to expect at the activities through their online 'Meetup' pages and WhatsApp channels.

- **Provide practical, itinerary style information in the initial engagement of a participant including whether there will be parking, the nearest train station/bus stop, and an idea of what the room looks like.**

Promotional materials include meeting places and activity locations pinpointed via Google Maps. This helps new members find parking spaces and nearby bus stops or train stations.

- **Provide clarity as to who the activity or initiative is for. This includes clear language about the level of proficiency that a person needs.**

Levels of proficiency are made clear with messages in the promotional materials such as 'all abilities welcome'.

The Samaritans service recommendations checklist asks:

Is practical information about the group easy to access, ahead of time, and regularly updated?

The practical information about the group is updated regularly on the online 'Meetup' page ahead of time.

Do promotional materials make clear expectations of participants, such as their level of proficiency?

Yes, advertisements state clear guidance on proficiency levels such as 'ALL abilities welcome and encouraged', and 'there's no obligation to speak and you won't be expected to do so unless you wish'.

Has a suitable level of communication with participants been considered to keep them engaged?

Various activity specific WhatsApp channels provide opportunities for open communication between participants, volunteers and trustees. Menfulness augment this with communication through Facebook and LinkedIn to keep members informed and engaged.

Participant quotes about being welcoming and accessible:

"Chaps a social friendly game of Footy! ALL abilities welcome and encouraged. This isn't a competitive match or team but a chance to have a game in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere."

"There's no obligation to speak and you won't be expected to do so unless you wish. But please do feel free to share your story, especially if it's relevant and might help someone else with theirs, we're not looking for advice or anyone to solve anyone's problems, just talking and lending a supportive ear."

"Please wear suitable clothing and sturdy footwear for the weather and for getting messy. Wear shorts and t-shirts at your own risk – scratches and stings are common in the pursuit of nature! Bring along any snacks and water to keep you hydrated for the session and work at your own pace and ability level."

Key principle 4: Foster meaningful relationships over time

The Samaritans service recommendations state that to keep participants engaged, wellbeing initiatives should:

- **Where resources allow, offer frequent sessions to give participants the best chance of building relationships**

Menfulness provide a range of volunteer led activities on a weekly and monthly basis. This encourages members to attend a number of different sessions and meet different people.

- **Consider how social support within an activity, such as being paired with a buddy, can be used to keep a participant engaged**

There is no specific buddy-up scheme employed within the activities, however, designated volunteers are available to introduce and integrate new members into groups. This aligns again with the Menfulness values of openness and inclusivity.

- **Aim to build rapport and communication among participants as time goes on. This should start with encouragement to talk but without pressure to do so**

Menfulness strike a clear balance in their advertising between the messages that there is no pressure for men to talk and that talking is encouraged if men wish to do so.

- **Consider group or team activities where possible to help foster relationships**

Menfulness provide a wide range of group and team activities across the service.

- **Facilitate 'extensions' of the activity – for example having a coffee afterwards, setting up email or WhatsApp groups**

Menfulness make clear within their advertising the spaces available after activities for a coffee or a catch-up. There is also a main WhatsApp channel, along with activity-specific channels providing the opportunity to extend post activity sessions.

The Samaritans service recommendations checklist asks:

Does the frequency of sessions encourage the fostering of relationships?

A number of Menfulness sessions are available for members to attend each week if they wish. Some sessions occur monthly and others by the nature of the activity are seasonal. The regularity of these activities helps encourage members to develop relationships if they wish.

How are participants expected to engage with others during activities? Are they in teams or working with a buddy?

This may vary depending on the activity for instance in the social football group participants will play in teams. At other activities such as talk groups or the running club, participants attend as individuals and gain a sense of cohesion through the facilitation of designated volunteers.

Is it possible to encourage relationships outside the activity, perhaps by setting up optional online groups or social events?

Menfulness run regular social events for members, their friends and families. Relationships outside traditional activities are encouraged through the use of activity specific WhatsApp channels, LinkedIn and Facebook groups.

Participant quotes about fostering meaningful relationships:

"Yeah, a couple in specific cause you do get a rapport with folk where you're like minded and also you know I've got some sort of connection to two people in particular. One, as I say we've now joined the golf club together. So, he's become a friend and we've met for a drink a few times as well, in the evening. So, that's an absolute strong positive because I can see us being friends. I think we're even thinking about going out with [our] wives as well to do that next month so that's nice."

"A genuinely nice man that I met at one of the activities - I think it was the walk and talk. Yeah, I said we should go for a coffee sometime!"

"You know, occasionally you'll talk to someone and find out that you've got things in common with them and I suppose that kind of bridges the gap between social connection and building rapport and having a understanding of other people. It is certainly comforting and it's nice to meet other people and find out you've got things in common with them, you know, [you] might be in similar sort of situations, in your personal circumstances."

Key principle 5: Foster a sense of achievement

The Samaritans service recommendations state that to engage participants, wellbeing initiatives should:

- **Make clear what may be achieved by partaking in an activity**

Menfulness make clear through their online promotions what to expect at each activity and what members may gain from skills-based activities.

- **Highlight the development of new skills**

Menfulness offer opportunities for the development of new skills through activities such as football, running club, tennis coaching, boxing, dad's hair school and the allotment group. They also offer activities which do not centre around the development of new skills for men who prefer more discussion-based activities in the form of talk groups.

- **Encourage personal goal setting at the beginning of an activity and take time to reflect on progress**

Although personal achievements are celebrated amongst members and Menfulness is open to individuals setting their own personal goals they do not actively encourage or measure personal progress.

- **Provide introductory sessions**

Menfulness provide introductory sessions to members interested in joining a group.

- **Ensure sessions are not described like there is an expectation to be proficient immediately**

Menfulness are clear through their communications that members of all skill levels are welcome at their activities. There is no expectation that men will become proficient at any of their activities.

- **Empower participants to contribute to the service by running parts of a session or deciding which activities to undertake**

Menfulness encourage its members to take an active role in group formation and organisation. A key principle within the charity is that the grassroots membership has the ability to suggest new initiatives and members with popular ideas can lead activities as volunteers. A recent example of this is the establishment of a new Board Game group which was set up by a volunteer member in May 2024.

- **Encourage friendly competition**

Menfulness offer activities which promote a non-competitive, friendly environment.

- **Appointing a coach to help improvement in a supportive way or consider buddy-up scheme**

Volunteers are appointed to run activities and are available to actively support members if this is necessary.

- **Reflect back to participants about skills learned and goals achieved**

Menfulness has cultivated a culture where personal goals and skills are celebrated on an individual basis when members wish to set themselves goals. Reflection on specific skill related goals is not actively encouraged as many members regard this as counterproductive.

The Samaritans service recommendations checklist asks:

Are there skills or goals which can be highlighted which men joining the group might want to develop?

Menfulness provide a wide range of activities some of which involve the development of skills. Menfulness do not promote goal setting as many members have expressed a dislike for goals as this is linked to anxiety, expectation and unhelpful competitive traits. Many members have stated the reason for joining Menfulness was the lack of goal and target setting which they felt often reminded them of the pressures they experienced at work or home.

Is there an opportunity for participants to consider their own goals and how to achieve them?

Menfulness are open to members developing their own personal goals but do not see this as important within the overall structure of the service.

How effective is the activity or service at supporting men to reach their goals?

Personal goals and achievements are celebrated by members within activity specific WhatsApp channels, for instance. As previously stated Menfulness do not consider supporting members to reach personal goals is particularly helpful.

Participant quotes about fostering a sense of achievement:

"I think that goals would be…detrimental. Yeah, absolutely."

"I think you'd have a negative effect. We come here voluntarily, just for ourselves, and the last thing we need is pressure on our mental health. Honestly, [I] think if something like that happened, well, I wouldn't be coming down again. It's not fair. No, this is us - talking. You know, we want to talk."

"Goals are not relevant. Yeah, that's part of the point, isn't it, that there is no expectation. Yeah, that's needed really."

"Yeah, I think counterproductive. Put some people off. You get that in other in other areas. And it's not about being masculine and being, you know, having an ego and being competitive and the kind of cliches about being male, it's extracting you from that really and being able to open-up and not be judgmental. And I think any kind of competition would be counterproductive."

"There's like, there's pressure if there's goals and things to that you have to achieve, there's more pressure that you put on yourself when you go to an event. You might be putting yourself under unnecessary stress to then achieve the goals that are put on by that event. And yeah, you don't really want that."

Insight:

Much of our research focused on mapping the effectiveness of Menfulness services against the Samaritans principles. The exercise was extremely useful as it provided Menfulness with a benchmark from the UK's foremost suicide prevention charity. It is clear through our research activities, individual interviews and focus group discussions that Menfulness exceed expectations across four of the five principles. Menfulness activities are all specifically developed to help provide opportunities for men to discuss any issues they may be struggling with. As well as providing dedicated talking groups Menfulness extend the opportunity to talk into their activity-based events too. This willingness to encourage conversation is based on the trustee's belief that talking is the key to reducing anxiety and depression and ultimately suicidal acts. This culture spreads to each activity through its volunteers who ensure every person attending events are made to feel welcome, with new members being given more attention to help them feel part of the group.

A real strength of the charity is the range of communication channels they utilise to both spread awareness of offline activities and help members connect with one another pre and post event. Menfulness are expert in using online media such as Meetup, podcasting and WhatsApp channels to increase attendance at events and afterwards to provide men with the opportunity to develop deeper connections and peer support. This approach is extremely effective in helping men develop a greater understanding of how their mental health can improve through connection, reflection and discussion with their peers. It is clear many of the men we interviewed had developed deep and meaningful connections with other men since joining Menfulness and attending activities. The variation and frequency of activities helps give men with different interests the opportunity to come along and experience being around others with similar interests. This is important as Menfulness do not attempt to fit 'square pegs' into 'round holes', this may make some men uncomfortable and deter them from engaging further with the service.

The most surprising finding of our research was when we asked men their views on how Menfulness helps fostering a sense of achievement and how the charity helps them achieve their personal goals. Each focus group participant had quite strong views on how goal setting and the development of skills was not the reason they attended events. Men told us that goals and target setting reminded them too much of the pressures they often experienced in their work or home life which they certainly did not need reminding of in group activities.

This finding initially surprised us, but on further reflection made sense. Menfulness encourage a culture of friendliness, camaraderie and honest communication between men and rejects some of the more harmful male centric traits based on competitiveness, striving and single-minded goal seeking. The men we interviewed seemed to have reflected on these differences too and were very aware of the cultural variation between Menfulness and expectations of themselves at work and home. We find the rejection of the fifth Samaritans principle - in this context - to be helpful. We feel the response to be indicative of the way in which men in our study seem to have changed some of their unhelpful masculine attitudes. This is an extremely interesting finding as it suggests to us that - at a deeper level - the Menfulness culture may have the ability to challenge both masculine socialised and hegemonic masculine attitudes and behaviours.

Podcast reports

The Menfulness podcast series is hosted by Sam Watling, a trustee of Menfulness and co-participant in this research study. The podcast aims to foster stigma-breaking and life-affirming conversations. Many interviewees are Menfulness group members and provide personal accounts of their own mental health challenges. The podcasts are characterized by honest vulnerability, a shared objective of understanding the issues faced by men and critical enquiry of the reasons behind men's reluctance to communicate about their mental health. For this project we interviewed a number of men who had listened to the podcast episodes and asked what they gained from being a podcast listener. The quotations below come from our first academically published research paper which asks "What do men gain from listening to men's mental health podcast episodes?" (Murphy et.al., 2024).

Murphy, H., Watling, S., Woodhams, J. and Shepherd, G., (2024). What do men gain from listening to men's mental health podcast episodes? Mental Health & Prevention, p.200347.

Hearing other men's lived experiences through the podcast enables some members to connect with each other more meaningfully at Menfulness activities

"I'm not very social. I have social anxiety and I don't like groups of people… I don't like groups of men. And it's bizarre that... I feel comfortable to just go in to the [in-person supporting events], just turning on, chatting to people who a few weeks ago, a few months ago I just didn't know at all and I'll have brilliant conversations with people and for me six months ago I could never have done that. And I think that is a lot to do with the podcasts, a lot to do with understanding other people's issues and sort of crafting them around my own".

"So people like [name] and [name], who I already knew from [their podcast], it was a way of hearing their story and hearing their human trials and tribulations and how they got to where they were so that I could get to know them better".

"…it's a strange one and I was talking to [man 1], who's just in the last podcast, and the other night we were down at the [group meetup] and I said 'it's a bit strange for me', I said, 'because obviously I just listened to your podcast last week', I said 'so for me, it's like, yeah, it's like, I feel like I know you'".

The podcast normalizes men's mental health struggles, and men feel less stigmatized, and less alone

"I think for me it's getting to understand exactly that other people out there are going through the same thing. You know, I'm not isolated. I'm not... I'm not the freak of the house, pardon the expression".

"They're approaching subjects that you and I would go 'I really want to talk about that' and people are actually sitting there and they're going through the subjects, they're going through the topics, they're going through their own personal experiences. And you're sitting and you're going ****! I've gone through that".

"I do struggle with my mental health at times, and I think that listening to the show, like I said, it helps me feel that I'm not alone in facing that and that you know I'm with part of a broader group of people who are trying to speak about it".

Help-seeking is encouraged through podcast listening

“You describe it [on the podcast] and they think ‘You know what, I’ve got to go to one of these talking sessions! I’ve got to go somewhere! I want to know more about Menfulness’… and that helps them in their journey”

“And then let’s talk about these audio-books and I think well, if I can listen to a podcast, then perhaps the way for[ward for me] is to read these books, that are kind of self-help books [this] is another way forward”

Men reflected on their masculinity and masculine socialization through podcast listening, which benefitted their wider relationships

“There [is such a] generosity of spirit and emotion and kindness that all the men at [the service] display. … the version of masculinity that I’ve been following is not helpful and I need to give more time to being kind, generous and more accepting of others”.

Research in Progress

For our second academic paper (which is still in development) we explored the way in which Menfulness trustees communicate their values through Menfulness podcast episodes. Throughout this research project we were very interested in understanding the values and cultural messages held by the board of trustees, which we felt were at the heart of the Menfulness charity. In order to explore these values we analysed podcasts featuring each of the five trustees and developed a number of ‘working’ themes which we outline below.

A culture of inclusivity was cultivated through a zero-tolerance policy towards harmful or offensive attitudes and strong boundaries. This enabled an encouraging and connected group dynamic:

“I've had a couple of times where I've had to kind of go ‘you know that's not what we're about’. So, there's obviously… there's a few divisive topics that people could get into, certainly politics, Brexit, whatever it could be - quite divisive. But that's not what we're about. We're about bringing people together and you know what? What brings us together? What connects us?”

“We're very aware that we support men or people who identify as male. And that can be a barrier and we've been very fortunate, haven't we, that we haven't really had misogynistic stuff and things like that. And every time we've had any even glimmer of it, we've absolutely shut it down. If you don't have someone who's got the wherewithal or the abilities to do that, it could go in a very different direction.”

The experience of hearing men discussing vulnerable material can encourage other men to engage with sharing in the group, this is described as a 'domino effect':

"It's like a domino effect. It's like sometimes you're at these talk groups. Yeah, you know, I didn't want to really talk, but then they [other group members] really open up and it's this domino effect of wow, yeah. And looking around, I mean each person that talks opens up a little bit more because they feel really safe, and it is a safe environment and that nine times out of 10 that is enough."

"I call it permission. It's slightly different, but what I find in this group is that if you're prepared to disclose a little bit about what you've got going on yeah, [a] little bit, people feel comfortable about saying what they've got going on a bit and then once you've got past that point in that both of you go, 'ah, we might not have the same situation, we might be going through different things, but the depths we can get to [and] the darkness we might feel, but want to escape from is not dissimilar."

An environment which fosters reflective practices, including reflection on the meaning of masculinity:

"Those labels that we give ourselves like 'I'm supposed to be the strong one', or 'I'm supposed to be the one that people rely on'. Especially as a teammate in a sport like that, it must be really hard to say, 'I can't be what you need right now' and I know in like construction, in the army and the police I can imagine that there's a lot of 'people are relying on me to be that guy'. And so, to be able to step out and say, 'I'm not that guy right now' takes courage. It isn't a weakness, because actually it's harder to do that than it is to just internalize it all and try and pretend everything's OK."

Self-awareness is promoted in terms of self-care practices and for emotional regulation:

"We've become a lot better at recognising when we're not in the right space… You know the empty bucket sort of description. And I think we've got a lot better realising if our bucket hasn't got anything in it, we can't just keep going and going and going because we're just going to fall over, aren't we?"

"I'm aware of some things that I can and can't take at that particular time, so sometimes the talk group will be amazing. I might have to bow out because of it being a particularly troubling week."

A proactive approach to mental wellness is embraced and encouraged:

"I would never say I've had a breakdown. I've never had any massive bouts of depression or anything like that. I wouldn't say I suffer from anxiety. However, I know there is massive merit in proactively managing my mental health by various different means. Yeah, and being part of this group has made me realise that more than ever."

"I've had counselling and feel I have needed it. Certainly, over the last year, I'm speaking to my counsellor about it and it's a protective factor. Because what's the other choice? The other choice for me would be to go down a very dark hole where I'm very, very sad and very, very angry."

Insight

It is interesting to compare and contrast the values and cultural messages communicated through trustee podcast episodes against the messages Menfulness members take from listening to the podcasts. Menfulness trustees encourage inclusivity and do not tolerate harmful hegemonic attitudes and behaviours in online or offline groups. This gives members an assurance their online and offline activities are safe enough to help them question their attitudes and behaviours in new ways (when the time is right of course). This is important when men begin to discuss their vulnerabilities or challenges and are looking for a deeper level of understanding and support from their peers.

The podcasts are a very effective way for men to begin the process of reflection on their own attitudes and behaviours in terms of what it means to be a man. Trustees see great value in the process of reflecting on experience and questioning men's internal processes, which is the key to new learning and eventually to behavioural change. Trustees encourage men to become proactive and take their mental wellbeing seriously. This may take the form of men speaking about their mental health to their peers, discussing their issues with a family member or visiting the GP or a counsellor to ask for help and advice. Along with this, trustees recognise the value of self-care and emotional regulation practices which help give men the tools to alter their behaviour. This pragmatic approach to mental health management helps members normalise their mental health struggles and how to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Focus group reports

Throughout the research project we attended a number of Menfulness activities and held focus groups with the members in attendance. This helped us gain a perspective on how members experiences mapped onto the five principles within the Samaritans handbook. The following section provides insight into some of the discussions we had in the Knights talk group, Breakfast club, Retro Games Night and Social Football group.

Knights talk group

The Knights talk group provides a monthly opportunity for men to get together and discuss at some depth, a range of issues which may be on their mind. The group is set in a relaxed, friendly environment and there is no compulsion for men to speak if they do not wish. Participants describes this talk group as a circle group session that fosters a safe environment to share vulnerabilities.

"The societal expectations and the weight that's been placed upon us as men is harmful. Is damaging individually and it's damaging to society, but the first time I walked in the door I was expecting a bunch of men and instead I saw a bunch of vulnerable human beings who [were] really talking."

"Coming into this environment where, like, it was all right to feel rubbish and have a cry and talk about your feelings and be really honest... It was just so critically important for me not feeling like I was going insane."

"Before I started coming here, I was at the lowest of the low. To the point where I was like, 'I'm going to try this and if it doesn't work, I'm done'. And yeah, I've tried to commit suicide in the past. And so, the fact I'm still alive, it's kind of testament to the value of this group. Having that support network there has been vital for me over the last few years and having people don't judge me for it because most of my friends I can find, most of my friends - they just don't talk about this stuff and if they do, they're judging the crap out of you or maybe you feel like they are. Here, I can say it and I don't feel judged."

"When I started coming to Menfulness, my life was falling apart a bit and I was down to two or three people I actually trusted and what I've found here is people that don't judge me. They take me for who I am."

"There isn't those instant questions of social and class structure of what do you do for a living? How much do you earn? Like I don't care whether people have a lot in common with me. It's the thing that matters is we trust each other, and we don't judge each other."

"Kind of quite a few meaningful friendships that aren't just surface level. A lot of previous friendships for me, bar sort of my close friendship group, [were] based around like you meet someone at a pub or you meet someone at a gig and the only thing you've kind of got in common is either music or beer? And then I stopped drinking about five years ago so I wasn't really making as many new friends. Which was OK by me, but since I've come here [I] have met people who have common interests in terms of like men's mental health and being the best version of you."

"It's really opened me out, socially. Like we've all been through our own stuff and we've arrived at a similar place from completely different angles, exteriors and angles. But we're all here for one reason and we can connect at a real sort of core level."

Breakfast club

The breakfast club is a place to share breakfast and a chat with like-minded men. It provides an atmosphere characterized by encouragement and positivity. The venue offers a chilled ambiance without structured activities, allowing for relaxed conversations.

"I think being someone that struggles with depression and has done, you know, for a number of years. It's just when you wake up and that motivation factor for me is a real struggle, but I know no matter what version of me turns up, I always come out feeling lifted, and the conversations and a nice breakfast and that's it. It then powers me for that day and it gives me that motivation to keep going really. It's that everyone's so positive and such a good sounding board to bounce ideas off, it just really helps me in that respect. And the fact that there is no 'activity' as such, just having a chat is perfect for me. Just to be able to talk to people."

"It's kind of the exact opposite, but the same thing as the Knights talking group. Whereas they have a very structured talking group, this is very, very relaxed talking group. But it isn't labelled as that, it's just coming for coffee – but it's the same thing."

"There was a few sat on one table, and I was a bit unsure, so I went to the other side and just them calling across and saying, 'look, come sit over here. You've done it now! You're through the door, you're here! Come on, come and join us over here'. Yeah, that was like reassuring. One of them, he pulled up the chair and said 'come over here and can I get you anything?' And I was like, yeah, I'll have a coffee, please. But he was just amazing and just so reassuring. Like, you've done it now, you've made that big leap – let me look after you."

"When I came, I was loitering about outside. And one of the gentlemen was outside and he immediately started talking to me and [asked me to] go in with him. And another chappy stood there who was very welcoming as well and you know, you immediately feel at ease."

"I came here to hopefully get more connections but where we could do stuff. And low and behold, soon after I joined during the summer, [name] came along who was doing the same thing. He knew he was retiring soon and as a result we've now joined a golf club together and we'll be playing some golf and socialise. So that's, you know, real."

"I've met people, especially others with children and whatnot, through it. I've made other friends who like, we've been on play dates and things like that, which is nice with other males to be able to do that [with]. It's not something that that people do, and it's been nice to meet people with children of a similar age and go out for coffees and to soft play and just get that socialisation and someone to talk to. Just unload on each other. I think we all need that sometimes as well."

Retro games night

The Retro Games night offers a retro gaming-themed evening in a pub setting, showcasing multiplayer classics such as GoldenEye and Mario Kart. It serves as a casual space for forging social connections without expectations. The atmosphere is characterized by a lack of competitiveness, fostering a relaxed environment within a familiar social context.

“I have made social connections, deep friendships with everyone, but just nice social connections like these guys in the pub. ‘Well, how are you doing? Yeah. Nice to see you again’ you know, similar sort of thing to that. And you know you can sort of dip in and out of any of the activities that the group organizes and it’s quite easy to do, so it’s no pressure, it’s sort of put out there for anyone wants to get involved. So if you’re looking for friendship groups or extra activities, I think the charity does facilitate that very well, yeah.”

“Men generally don’t want to do that competitive stuff. It’s like you get that in other in other areas... I mean you compete at work, and you compete in dating and every other [aspect]. It’s quite nice to have a realm where you don’t have to compete. There’s no pressure to come. You don’t get points for coming to more events. ”

“I would say it’s it exceeded my expectations. I just came down to meet a friend that I normally meet in the pub and then when we heard about this night, we said yeah, we’ll try and get to that and you know, I just thought we’d come for a drink and maybe have a game of whatever, but I’ve made other social connections just from being here. You know, I think the culture of the charity is to facilitate new friendships and actively going and seeing the guy in the corner and saying ‘how are you doing, mate? What’s your name? Do you fancy a game of this?’. And, actually, I didn’t expect any of that but I’ve tried to get involved with that sort of mentality as much as possible from coming down and I’ve found it really rewarding and I’ve enjoyed it. ”

Social Football

This alternative version of football is characterized by a non-competitive ethos. It serves as a platform for individuals to engage in physical activity and if they wish, to forge meaningful connections. Participants note the remarkable inclusivity of the group and emphasise its welcoming atmosphere. The pay-to-play structure has been commended for accommodating individuals unable to make significant levels of commitment.

"A lot of football you have to sign up for a season or so and for me that just doesn't work for me. And so being able to pay-and-play has been great and actually I probably play more because I don't have to commit that. I think there's the right level of competitiveness, it's people who want to play well but not in a toxic way, not in an overly aggressive tackling way. So, I think for me, it's a great level. It's exactly what I'm looking for."

"The football was the first thing I came down to and what struck me first about it was how welcoming everybody was. I think football has a thing of being a bit toxic at times and I've never found that down at the [Menfulness] football group and I think that just promotes such a good environment for people to chat and speak afterwards, after the footy is finished."

"I didn't need to come down to football to try and get that, 'let's talk about your feelings' but it helped to be in an environment where it was competitive, but there was no scores, which I've never played a football environment where you played and no scores and you could just shoot from one end of the pitch to the other and not get shouted at like obviously because I think because Menfulness is a group where you can sign up on Meetup and you can you can come down, you will get the odd person who won't understand what Menfulness is about and might like not understand the attitude of what we're trying to get, but 99% of people who are [there] will actually cheer you on for taking that long shot or whatever, which I think is great because I've fallen back in love with football again through coming down to the football events, whereas there has been five years of not playing at all, right? But that's all down to the people that are there."

"I didn't actually know what Menfulness was when I came down for the first time. It was my friend who recommended that we go down and try this football group out, and I've been to football groups in the past and I've been there all night, and nobody's asked me my name kind of thing. But that's what struck me - as soon as we got there, people coming up and introducing themselves to me."

"While I was playing, I'm fully aware I was terrible and I'm still not very good. But it was just the thing of they pass to me still and I really expected to like, playing football in high school and stuff you just wouldn't get passed to if you weren't. So like when I came here like immediately, like I got the ball first. I think on my first game and I was like, I don't even know what to do with it. Like, I don't know anyone like, so I just sort of… I think I made so many mistakes but every time someone was giving [me] like positive reinforcement of like 'yeah, you could try but maybe try this'. That was really good and for me, I mean, I was like pretty anxious and I just wasn't like, the best version of myself. So it really reinforced, like, this is a good environment to be in. It's probably good for me to be here."

Insight

There is a real honesty in the Talk group where men are free to express some very deep feelings and disclose often very private thoughts and ideas. Men recognised other men as human beings who are free to cry and express themselves in new ways. Discussions around suicide are also a striking example of the candid nature of the talk group, which coupled with a culture of trust and 'realness' helps members connect with themselves and each other at personality changing levels.

The Breakfast club seems a much less intense experience than the Talk group with men feeling much more relaxed with less of a structure to their conversations. This group offers the opportunity for men to develop friendships with people who may have the same interests or who are at the same stage of life. Conversations within this group revolve around a friendly breakfast and a relaxed start to Sunday morning and the chance for men to talk to their peers around general mental health and wellbeing issues if they so wish.

Men attending the Retro Games night seem to be more attracted to being with like-minded men within a social setting. There are less opportunities to speak about mental health subjects than in talk-based groups but this is offset by the real feeling of camaraderie and togetherness group members experience. Men are not really interested in competing with others at video games, but more interested in developing and establishing connections which feel more authentic and create a closer connection than in their day-to-day lives.

The Social Football group shatters the assumptions that playing amateur football needs to be a highly competitive, tremendously serious and unforgiving pastime. Many men are discouraged from playing football at an early age due to the way in which it tends to encourage competitive, aggressive masculine behaviours. This is problematic as such an attitude within football excludes men who do not have or are trying to reduce such personality traits.

The Social Football group understand the benefit of friendliness, sportsmanship and the pleasure of playing a group game without competitive expectations. Many members feel a sense of relief when joining the group and this in itself helps them relax and be more honest around their feelings.

These groups provide examples of the range of activities on offer to Menfulness members and the level of emotional depth and social connections the activities provide. These activities seem to form a natural continuum of support. On one hand talk-based groups offer a depth of intensity and honesty which some men crave as they can be highly transformative. On the other hand, activity based groups offer a different level of connection and intimacy which depends on how comfortable and prepared men within such groups are to engage with others.

Menfulness volunteer case study

An important part of this research was to understand how Menfulness attracts new volunteers to their service and what motivates people to develop new activity groups. In order to do this, we carried out three face-to-face interviews with men who had been on this journey. In the next section we present a case study of Alex (pseudonym) and his story of becoming a volunteer.

How did you first become aware of Menfulness?

"I think it was because Matty [trustee] went on First Dates! I saw in the local news, and it popped up in my Twitter feed and I was like 'oh that's interesting!' And I've always had a vested interest in mental health and I did a lot of advocacy [and] awareness stuff in one of my jobs so I started following them on Twitter and then Facebook and then podcast and that kind of thing. So yeah, it's all because Matty needed a girlfriend!"

And so, you became a member?

"Yeah, so I went to my first event in like November 2022 and I went to the Retro gaming night cause it's just down the road from me. I wasn't a great place at the time. I was experiencing some quite acute health anxiety and I was anxious around the arrival of my first child. My daughter was born in January last year and I just kind of needed… I knew I needed to make some new friends and, you know, find some support so I went down there a few times and I've been posting a lot about the podcast on the Facebook group and I adversely caught Sam's attention as being a persistent listener and then he invited me forward to participate [in the focus group] for the podcast. So that's kind of how I got a bit more involved, I think, and started attending more events and my son arrived. I [then] started attending The Breakfast Club because that was sort of the child friendly thing and [I was] going to meet other dads - and dads that I could, I could have kind of real conversations with, you know."

And people were able to take their kids along with them to the breakfast club?

"Yeah, that was a big plus for me because I was struggling to find anything that I felt was dad friendly. I found that I didn't get a lot of, well, any support really for being a new dad. I was asked about my history of mental health problems and that was it. There wasn't any follow on, you know. So, I was like oh OK, I'd better find my own help. And The Breakfast Club was something, I took my daughter down there when she was four or five months old, I think. And because it was an opportunity for me to get out with her and to give my wife a break."

I suppose there's quite a few mum and baby groups, but you don't really get dad and baby groups as often.

"No, I mean there are like a lot of them, you know, the stuff that my wife attends is like it's Dad friendly, but there aren't many dads there or should I say like non-birthing partners and I've been to a couple, but the majority is mums and you know I was reading a bit about this online actually and I just it's something that I felt like I don't really feel comfortable like I don't feel like and I sort of feel like I'll be judged or people will think I've got bad intentions or something. I don't know, it's just not necessarily a comfortable environment for me to go to and I feel like there's a big lack of anything really Dad-centric in York to be honest."

And at what point did you decide to become a volunteer and what made you want to become a volunteer initially?

"I felt like I was getting quite a lot from Menfulness, like [from] attending and I'd been added to the allotment WhatsApp group as an interested party. Nothing seemed to be really moving anywhere so I kind of let it let it lie for a little while. And there was one day I was just coming back from work on the train and I'd been exchanging voice notes with Sam

And I was like, 'you know I feel like I can give something back, you know, like I want to support other guys' and I think I felt like a few guys had kind of opened up to me and I felt like I could almost like maybe create a situation where I could make a different kind of guy feel comfortable or something, you know, because Menfulness has these sort of the diverse but kind of very specific offerings and I'd been talking to Sam about [it] because he obviously had done the podcast [episode] and [so] he knew I was into my gardening and horticulture. And he said, 'look, we've got this allotment and I've spoken to the guys, and we'd like you to lead the project'. Which was honestly like a bit of a dream come true for me! I wrote my dissertation on the mental health benefits of gardening… And then and then Sam was like asking me to basically put it into practice and it's one of these things that I've always been interested in. It's always helped me a lot, so I felt like I could give that to other people.

So, people tend to approach you to open up to you anyway, but then when Sam knew what your interests were he approached you saying 'look here's this opportunity'?

Yeah, but I'd prompted him by being like 'can I do something to help?' and then he sort of put the pieces together, you know, he facilitated it. I think that was a big thing for me is that Sam sort of said, 'I'll help you with this' and you know, 'I think you'd be great at it'. And he was a really positive facilitator for me. He gave me all the things that I needed and helped me do the things that I wasn't good at and all those kinds of things. So, it was quite like a positive experience setting it up in that regard. He resourced and funded it, he helped me with the set up and the admin and he helped me promote it and sort of put himself behind it as well you know. It kind of helps that it's in Haxby but he was there and really hands on with everything, but I think for me the main thing was sorting the practicalities and resourcing them. You know, like buying the equipment that we needed and then I went down there and told people what to do basically. Sam ordered it which again was a big thing for me because he was able to take deliveries and just sort practicalities whereas, you know, I guess I had a young baby at the time, I was struggling quite a lot with my job and stuff.

So, you've said your volunteer activity is the allotment and ideas around the benefits of horticulture for mental health.

My belief is that we're connected to the food that we eat and the kind of seasonality of that food and I think like growing it yourself and cooking it yourself and I'm quite a big believer in this kind of science that backs it up, like having kind of good, healthy food we improve our overall health and getting exercise and in in all kind of [ways]. So, I had this sort of holistic idea that we could grow our own food and I could teach people what to do with it. If it was something they weren't getting at the supermarket, you know it would be pesticide free and they'll be getting the kind of stimulation that you get from doing a manual task that we don't really get in our modern lives very much. It was primarily doing the allotment and then also like teaching people how to use the produce.

How did the word get out about the group, initially?

I guess I did a fair amount of promotion myself just by word of mouth and kind of dragging people along but there were a few people that that kind of came just cause they'd seen it on meet-up as well. So, we set it up on meet-up and I think some of the guys advertised [it] on Facebook, I think it was advertised on LinkedIn as well and so it went up on LinkedIn and the WhatsApp group and we set up a separate WhatsApp group and invited people to that. It was a multifaceted approach, I think.

How much time do you spend and volunteering each week?

I don't know because the lines are quite blurred because I do a lot of peer-to-peer support and it's partly because I like helping people, so I spend time talking to people on WhatsApp and I don't know where that's friendship and where that's volunteering, you know and signposting for people, checking in on people. I would say doing allotment stuff when it's in season, maybe four or five hours a week. But I almost don't really see it as work because I quite enjoy it like you know it's fulfilling to help people.

What is it about running a group that is personally satisfying for you?

It just gives me a sense of satisfaction to know that it's not something that everybody has the opportunity to do, not everybody has outside space or the knowledge to grow stuff. So, for me, I find it really fulfilling that I can give that to them more or create a space where they can do that, because I realize I'm quite privileged you know, I've got a garden, I've got my own lot. It gives me an opportunity to share that thing with other people and the achievement of what we could do as a group was quite satisfying as well. You know, many hands make light work!

Insight

Alex became aware of Menfulness primarily through a TV programme and subsequently through a number of social media posts. Alex had an interest in engaging with people and was interested in the subject of mental health, which drew him closer to Menfulness. We felt that as Menfulness became more important to Alex in solving some of his problems, his need to give something back to the charity grew. This is important and highlights the way in which Menfulness offers real help and support for men in both emotional and practical ways.

After making enquiries and receiving support from Trustee Sam Watling, Alex began to plan his own Menfulness volunteering activity. Social media was at the heart of promoting his new group to members and helped make the allotment group activity inviting. It is interesting to note that Alex now spends quite a lot of his time supporting men on his Menfulness WhatsApp channel. This helps strengthen members connection to Menfulness and deepens engagement with the activity. From all of the research we have carried within this project, it is clear that engagement through a number of different social media channels seems to be an important component in the success of the charity.

Other volunteer perspectives

To gain further insight into the perspectives of Menfulness volunteers, we conducted one-to-one interviews with two more individuals who began as members and chose to contribute further to the Menfulness community. We were interested to know more about the interviewee's motivations to volunteer, their experiences as volunteers and the impact of their volunteer work. The insights gained highlight the significant impact Menfulness has on its members, many of whom are motivated to give back by volunteering.

"It's just having a group of guys that [I] can support wherever you know, I was surviving now I'm thriving and that's the difference and where I'm at so I'm able to - rather than taking now I'm like going to give… 'what do you need!'"

"A sincerest thanks to the guys. What a wonderful bunch of souls that have devoted, in some cases, this is probably the most valuable time that they have with very young children. And the fact that they're they are still managing to do this they're superheroes. They're wonderful. They're really, really are and I don't think they understand what this movement that they have created has done for me and many, many, many others. Spectacular. they're heroes in my eyes."

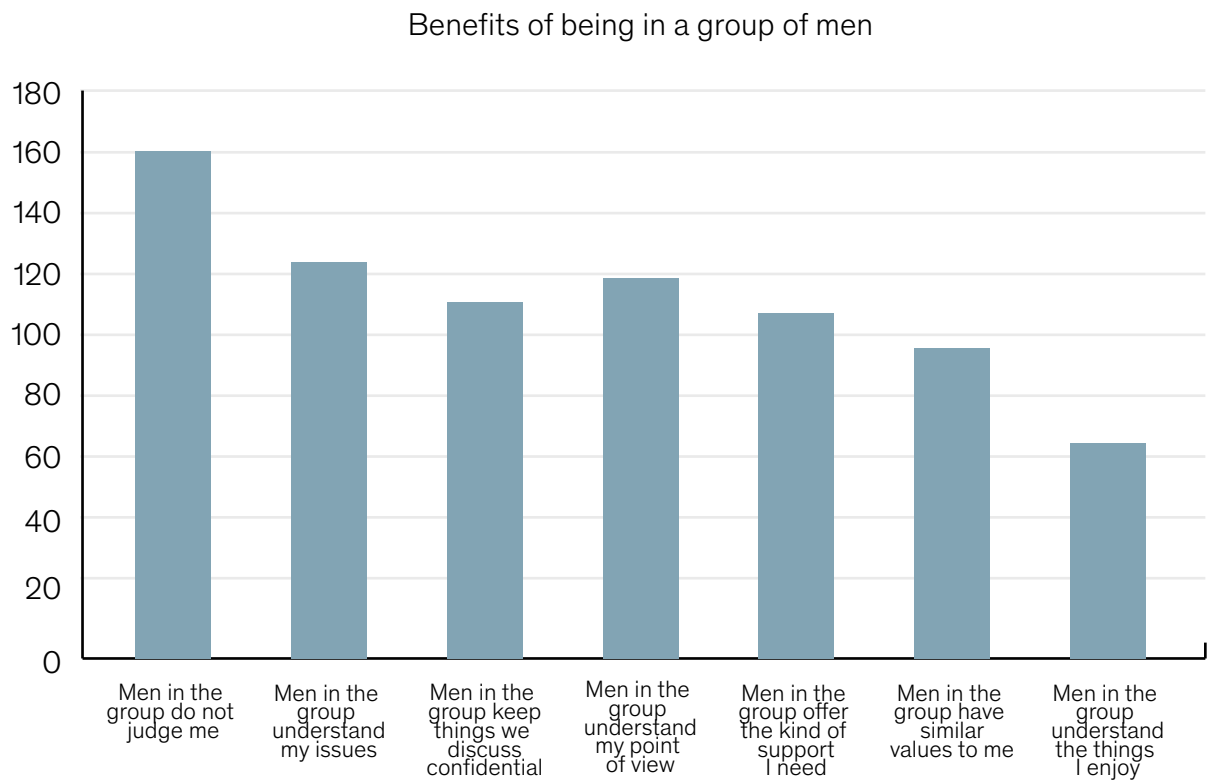
"I think we just need to just accept and just listen. I think that's becoming more a part. We're just saying right, OK, I think we just need to just relax a little bit and not jump in with all the solutions, men like to do that obviously. And I think what we're what's what seems to be happening now is people are asking the right questions. Ask the questions that need to be answered as opposed to giving advice out."

"In terms of like men's mental health, being part of Menfulness has really helped me be more transparent and particularly like showing emotion and towards like people I love and care about."

"With football like, I get a lot out of it like cause its physically active stuff. I've [also] realized that some of the lads that I'm playing with are like in their early twenties, and there's times where I realized they sort of ask me things about their personal life or they'll say stuff and I think they're actually asking me because they see me as an older person. So I get to do a small amount of like mentorship or being a role model or you know, I try and set a tone of inclusivity and positivity through the way I welcome people, remembering people's names and, you know, trying to remember little things that they said to me. And so, I get a lot of validation out of that because I feel like I can do a good job at it. And also [I get] the same things that people aren't volunteers, they say, you know - it's great for them, it's social, it's active - I get all of that."

"I always try and make sure that I don't just speak to the same people. So, I guess that's been actively inclusive and welcoming and I try and speak in a way that is transparent about my own feelings about what's happening in my own life. So [if] someone asked me how I am, then I have said before 'I've had a really **** week', because that would be really like counterproductive if I just showed up and was like, 'yeah, great' you know? And so, I try and be transparent."

Impact statistics

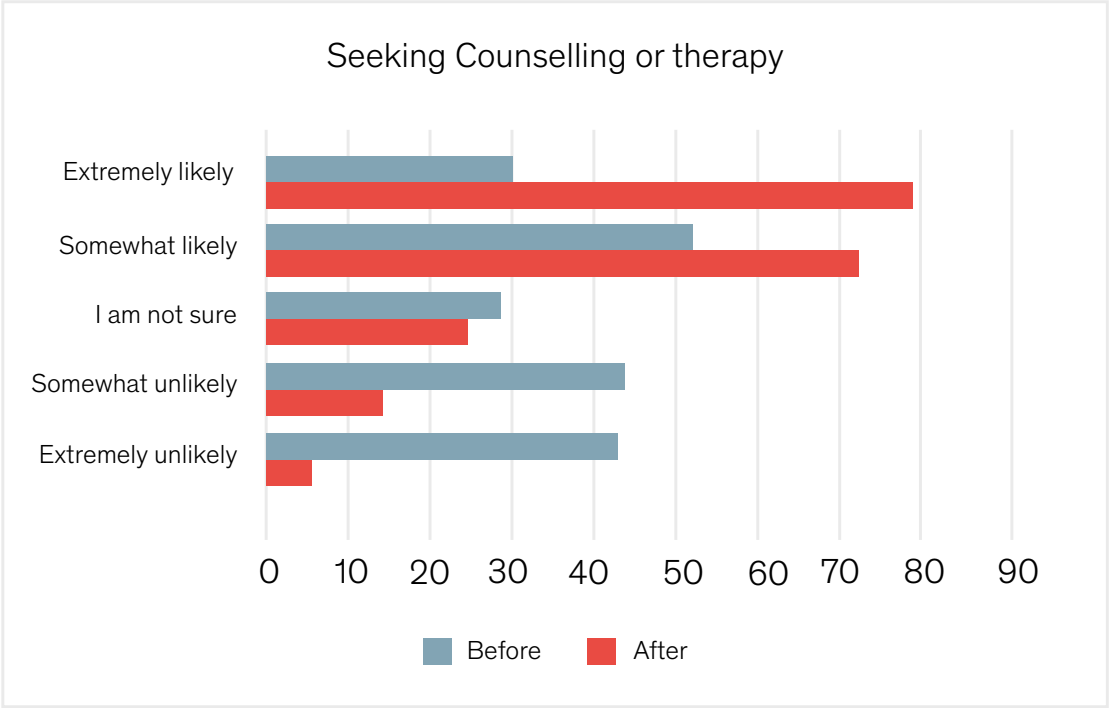


Being in a group

As part of our Qualtrics survey we asked men what benefits they found from being in a group. The most frequently reported benefit was the absence of judgement, as 160 participants cited not feeling as judged. The second most reported benefit was the sense of understanding from other men in the group, with 126 participants reporting that they felt other men in the group understood their issues. The third most commonly reported benefit was 119 participants felt that other men understood their point of view. The least commonly reported benefit with only 66 participants indicated that it was beneficial for group members to understand the things they enjoyed.

Insight:

The results suggest that the primary benefits for men in a male-only group are feeling understood and accepted. The lower significance placed on shared enjoyments suggests that having superficial commonalities is less important to the respondents compared to a deeper emotional and psychological understanding.



Help seeking

Prior to their involvement in the Menfulness community, 43 participants (22%) reported being extremely unlikely to seek counselling or therapy with only 30 participants (15%) reporting being extremely likely to seek counselling or therapy.

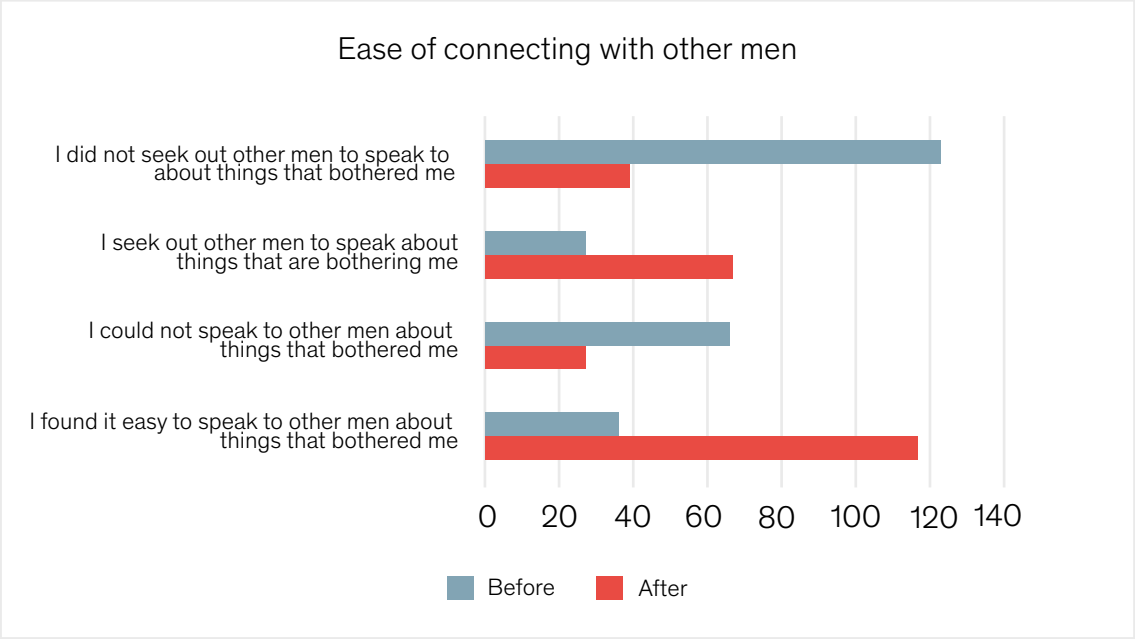
Since becoming involved with the Menfulness community, the number of participants who would be extremely unlikely to seek counselling or therapy decreased to 5 (3%) and the number of participants who would be extremely likely to seek counselling or therapy increased to 79 (40%).

Insight:

These statistics indicate that membership of the Menfulness charity may actually improve male help seeking. This is an important finding in light of the fact that men do not traditionally seek help during periods of mental distress and many studies indicate this as a real barrier to reducing anxiety, depression and suicidal acts*.

*Shepherd, G., Astbury, E., Cooper, A., Dobrzynska, W., Goddard, E., Murphy, H. and Whitley, A., (2023). The challenges preventing men from seeking counselling or psychotherapy. Mental Health & Prevention, 31, p.200287.

Impact statistics



Connecting with other men

Prior to involvement with the Menfulness community, 124 participants (49%) reported that they did not seek out other men to discuss things that bothered them, whilst 37 participants (15%) reported finding it easy to speak to other men about things that bothered them.

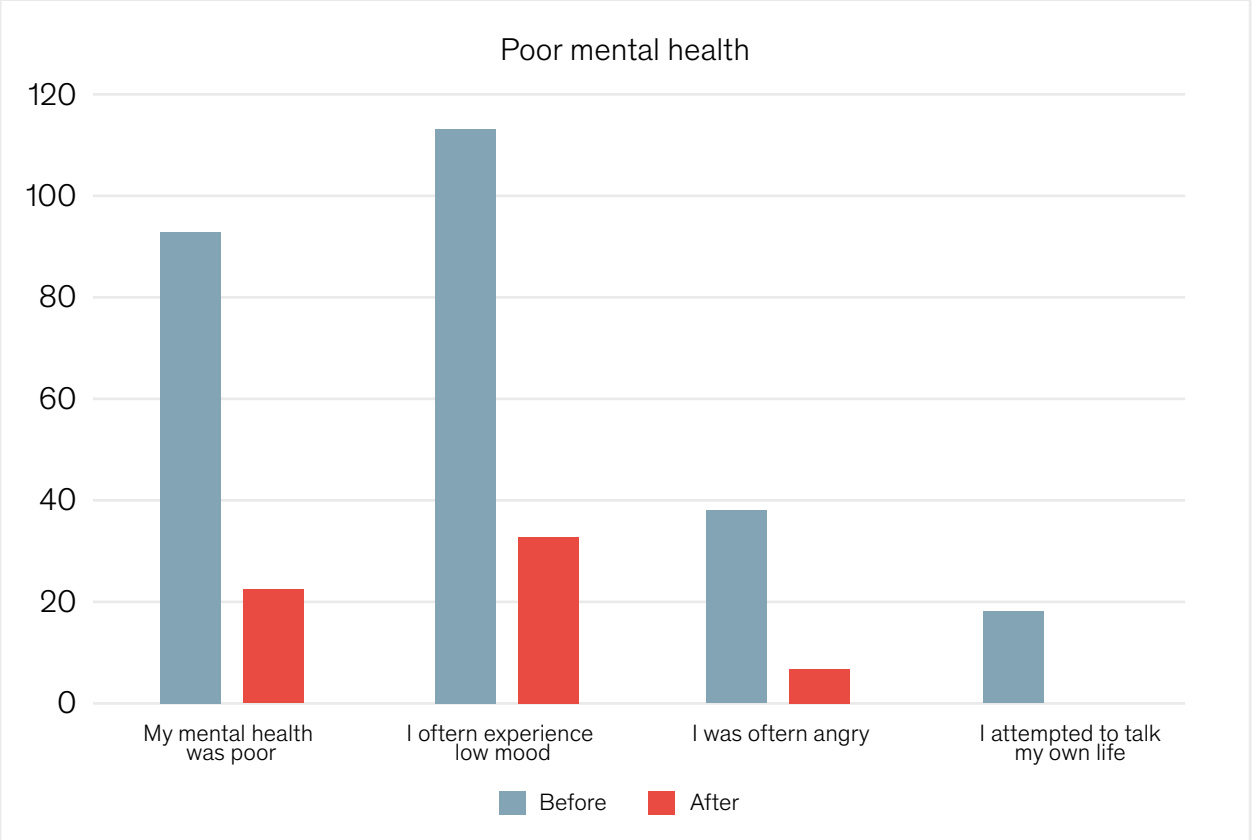
Since becoming involved with Menfulness there have been notable changes in communication patterns, with the number of participants who would not seek out other men to discuss things that bothered them decreasing to 40 (16%) and men who found it easy to speak to other men about things that bothered them increasing to 118 (47%).

Insight:

These findings highlight a significant improvement in the willingness and ability of participants to communicate with other men about issues that bother them since joining the Menfulness community. This shift suggests the positive impact Menfulness may be having on fostering open communication and on facilitating closer relationships.

These findings may be important in light of research suggesting traditional masculine norms may inhibit men from forming close relationships with other men. Men who do experience closer relationships tend to have improved emotional wellbeing and physical health*.

*Ríos-González, O., Ramis-Salas, M., Peña-Axt, J.C. and Racionero-Plaza, S., 2021. Alternative friendships to improve men's health status. The impact of the new alternative masculinities' approach. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18(4), p.2188.



Mental health

Prior to joining Menfulness, the data revealed concerning trends in mental health among participants. 92 men reported experiencing poor mental health, 112 men often experienced low mood, 37 men often experienced anger and 17 men reported attempting to take their own life.

Since becoming members of Menfulness, there seems to have been significant improvements in men's mental health: the number of men reporting poor mental health decreased to 22 , only 32 men continued to experience low mood, reports of frequent anger dropped to 6 men and notably, no men reported they had attempted to take their own lives.

Insight:

Again, this data suggests Menfulness has a positive impact on men's mental health. The reduction across the board in relation to poor mental health, low mood, anger and suicide attempts among members may be related to the novel way in which Menfulness utilises both online channels and offline activities for its members.

Friends and Family Questionnaire

In our final Qualtrics survey we sought to gain an understanding of the broader impact of Menfulness has on member's friends and families. The following quotations below provide a flavour of the Qualtrics survey from some of our 40 respondents.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart, you have given me my husband back."

I encouraged my loved one to participate in the Menfulness activities and events because whenever he comes home from one, he has a massive smile on his face and seeing him smile makes my day because he hasn't been smiling that much recently. Menfulness are a great charity doing great work that is much needed."

It is far easier for him to open up to them than maybe to me as his mother, for which I am very, very grateful."

I feel the impact has been massive in respect of the comfort, support, security and sharing of difficult times that is available with and through Menfulness."

A good place to be social, also get good exercise and to talk about feelings."

Very impressed at how the organization has grown and spread its wings to help countless other guys too and feel it has empowered all of them to have improved self-esteem and to enable them to give back too when their mental health begins to improve."

Conclusion

There is little doubt in our minds that Menfulness is a highly regarded and successful men's mental health and suicide prevention service. Group members are keen to express their admiration of the charity and each person has their own stories of how Menfulness has helped support them to overcome their mental health issues. The service is growing its membership and has a number of committed volunteers who ensure offline activities are both engaging and resonate with the core values espoused by the trustees. Menfulness should be rightly proud of the contribution they make to improving mental health and reducing suicidality in York and the surrounding areas.

Menfulness are masterful in their use of social media channels which underpin a number of crucial activities that connect men together. Typically, men joining the service have discovered Menfulness from some kind of social media marketing campaign. They are then enrolled onto a main WhatsApp channel where they begin to appreciate the prevailing culture of support and inclusivity. After a while some men explore the 'Meetup' pages where they book offline activities along with men of similar interests. After the activity, men who are interested can access activity-specific WhatsApp channels where they can deepen their relationships with attendees. This complex and effective model is in our opinion, the main innovation Menfulness bring to the field of men's mental health and suicide prevention.

Menfulness attract a number of men deemed 'at risk' of suicidality by national statistics. Before joining the charity, many men report being disconnected from others, unwilling to seek help, deeply depressed and suicidal. These facts underline the serious and urgent need for services to provide effective mental health support for men with such concerning symptoms. The power of Menfulness in this respect lies in the cultural messages it transmits through its WhatsApp channels, encapsulated by such hashtags as #DontManUpSpeakUP and #werisebyliftingothers. Cultural messages are repeated on social media channels throughout the service and at offline activities by volunteers and group members. The consistency and genuineness of the messaging provides men with the assurance that in times of stress and when the time is right, there are always people around to listen and support them.

The charity has grown its membership in a number of postcode areas around the city of York. Some people would describe the largest postcode areas as being economically advantaged and note the paucity of members originating in areas of social and economic deprivation. This is not in any way a criticism -nor is it engineered- but comes a consequence of the geographic areas the trustees live and work. Along with this fact, a number of Menfulness members have managerial type occupations and seem to be relatively financially advantaged. The charity may be equally advantaged by the economic circumstances of the men who become involved in Menfulness as volunteers and supporters. These facts are important for Menfulness to bear in mind if they have future expansion plans. We envisage the Menfulness model's success in areas of the country with similar demographics to York such as Harrogate, Lincoln or Chester for instance.

Should Menfulness wish to expand the charity into areas which are more socio-economically disadvantaged there will be a number of issues to consider. The main benefit of expanding services into more deprived areas is the potential for Menfulness to help more men experiencing anxiety, depression and suicidality. This offers the potential to improve men's mental health in an area traditional services may class as 'hard to help'. If Menfulness could successfully replicate their model into disadvantaged areas the service would have real potential to grow both regionally and nationally. Issues to consider for Menfulness moving into more challenging geographic areas include the acute mental health problems in such areas, men's lower social capital and the financial constraints preventing some men engaging with the charity in the same way as York members.

MENFULNESS

3/4 of All Suicides Are By Men (ONS)

Suicide is the biggest killer of men under the age of 50. Men are three times more likely to become alcohol dependant or use drugs. 87% of rough sleepers are men. Nearly three quarters of adults who go missing are men. We exist to help men and reduce these numbers.

We provide support to men

We're a registered charity providing men with the support, tools and outlets to improve their physical and mental wellbeing. Although we're largely funded by donations and fundraising efforts, we've also received grants from City of York Council, National Lottery, Two Ridings, Brelms Trust.

#DontManUpSpeakUp

We normalise talking about the challenges life throws at us. We also encourage getting professional support when peer to peer support isn't enough. Bringing guys together to let off steam, laugh, talk and cry can make a huge difference to someone's life.

We Rise By Lifting Others

We're aware that we cant solve every man's issues but we know that facing them with support helps. Our work is self funded or grant funded and we are volunteer led, which means we channel all funds back into reaching and helping men, whether through events or counselling.

Meet Simon:

Simon came across Menfulness through a dad's group where he and his son found a social outlet after the breakdown of his marriage. He's attended most of our groups and says, 'There's never any judgement, just people listening and supporting each other as best we can.' He's hosted our football for four years and also now hosts our Breakfast Club. In June this year he passed his Level 3 in Counselling Skills, and with the knowledge he's gained helping with his own mental health he's now working on helping others.

menfulness.org
@menfulness