

University Good Life Project Evaluation

March 2020 – July 2021

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Project overview

Background

In March 2020, the South Provider Alliance Innovation Fund commissioned the University Good Life Project, which was designed and delivered by CPSL Mind in partnership with Anglia Ruskin University, the University of Cambridge, Cantab and Cam Medical Primary Care Network to support students' mental health and wellbeing.

A need had been identified by the Cantab and Cam Medical Primary Care Network and other GPs in Cambridge who were reporting a significant increase in university students requiring support for mild-moderate mental health issues.

University Good Life Project Proposal

The University Good Life Project focussed on university students studying at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) and the University of Cambridge (UoC).

The original project brief proposed delivering weekly Good Mood Cafes and Open Door calm spaces for the student community on campus or in local community cafes or spaces. The sessions were planned to be facilitated in person by a CPSL Mind Good Life Facilitator alongside student volunteers.

Good Mood Cafes and Open Door calm spaces are established community-based wellbeing sessions offered by CPSL Mind's wider Good Life Service.

<https://www.cpslmind.org.uk/how-we-help/good-life-service/>

Good Life Service Offer



Good Mood Cafes are informal 'get togethers' designed to connect individuals to other like-minded people within their communities; offer wellbeing support and share interests and skills.

"It's OK not to be OK, so you don't have to be in a good mood to come along to our Good Mood Cafe – but we hope everyone will leave the Good Mood Cafes feeling better than when they arrived".



Open Door calm spaces provide a safe space to learn and practice self-help techniques such as breathing exercises and mindfulness, which can help reduce stress and anxiety.

These sessions also offer guidance on self-help techniques which can help to 'ground yourself' and feel better – both in that moment and in the future.

In addition, the project proposal outlined plans to deliver information sessions to provide practical tools and skills to improve mental health and wellbeing. These sessions would offer support and guidance to identify local services that can best help students' mental health and wellbeing and help students to make a referral.

The University Good Life Project commenced in March 2020 which coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to government restrictions on social mixing and multiple subsequent national lockdowns, the project was unable to launch as a face-to-face community-based mental health offer as planned. The offer was quickly adapted to online delivery and launched in May 2020 using the video conferencing platform Zoom.

The University Good Life Project online offer consisted of:

University of Cambridge

- Weekly online Good Mood Cafe
- Weekly online Open Door calm space

Anglia Ruskin University

- Weekly online Good Mood Cafe
- Weekly online Open Door calm space

An adaptation to the project, to replace face to face delivery during the pandemic, was a wellbeing information phone line that was trialled for ARU students from October 2020-April 2021 in place of the in-person information sessions. The phone line was available every Friday between 12-2pm to provide additional emotional and practical support to students. Signposting to appropriate mental health services through the phone line was designed to increase knowledge of where to access support for the students who called the phone line.

Aims of the University Good Life Project

The expected outcomes of the University Good Life Project were to:

- increase students' social connections and circles of support.
- increase wellbeing and self-care of students accessing the Good Mood Cafes, information sessions and Open Door calm spaces.
- increase students' knowledge of where to access support.

The outcomes were measured through the numbers of students attending the Good Mood Cafes and Open Door calm spaces, and case studies and feedback collected from students. Some of the proposed measures, such as using a token system at the Good Mood Cafes to measure connectivity, were adapted to Zoom polls because of the online delivery of the service.

Other proposed measures for the project, such as numbers signposted to Good Mood Cafes by GP surgeries, patient case studies and patient feedback via GPs, were not appropriate due to increased demand on GPs during the Covid-19 pandemic and reportedly less students accessing support via their GP.

Key project outcomes

Total number of students the project supported:

388



97% students felt more relaxed after attending a session

97% learnt new skills to contribute to their wellbeing

96% reported that they would practice these skills outside the sessions



100% of students felt more connected to others since joining the cafe

88% picked up wellbeing tips or created a wellbeing plan

87% realised their skills, passions or strengths

Evaluation

Covid-19 pandemic and adaption to online delivery

The adaptation to online delivery required significant changes to the way the University Good Life Project was delivered, and the project team were required to navigate how to adapt to a different way of working.

Challenges of online delivery:

- Navigating the unknown risks involved in delivering support online (e.g. Zoom bombing, safeguarding and data protection).
- Adapting the delivery of wellbeing sessions designed to be delivered face to face in the community (e.g. creating an informal cafe atmosphere online and a relaxing space).
- All sessions became whole group sessions, which prevented the opportunity for smaller groups or one to one chats between students to happen organically.
- The 'on the ground' planned means of promotion, such as leaflet dropping was not possible, and most of the marketing and promotion took place online.
- Students were all required to sign up in advance and not able to drop in, preventing students from happening across sessions on campus.
- Engaging students in sessions who kept their camera and audio turned off.
- Zoom fatigue- 'tiredness, worry or burnout associated with the overuse of virtual platforms of communication, particularly videoconferencing' (*Psychology Today, Feb 2021*).
- Communicating what exactly the sessions offered e.g. some confusion about sessions being a formal workshop rather than peer support and informal wellbeing support.

Positive outcomes of online delivery:

- Online sessions are more easily accessible to some students, e.g. students currently abroad, students with disabilities, students unable to travel to campus due to childcare issues or transport issues, students with social phobia or agoraphobia etc.
- An online offer can allow attendees to be anonymous to others in the group, e.g. by keeping their camera off and audio on mute. This may enable those students who are more anxious about seeking support to access the sessions.
- The online offer inspired the process of introducing 'themes' for each session, which was a new concept for the University Good Life Project.

The University Good Life Project was launched in unprecedented times, and the world as a collective was feeling uncertain and under extreme stress and anxiety.

The Good Mood Cafes and Open Door calm spaces offered a safe space for students to talk about their feelings of uncertainty, fear, stress and anxiety, as well as other emotions and concerns that students were dealing with throughout the year. The wellbeing sessions aimed to tackle the stigma of mental health challenges and encourage open conversations and offer support. Students could listen to others who

were going through similar experiences to themselves, and gain peer support during a challenging and unusual year.

Many students returned home, disengaged from their studies and withdrew from participating in university events in the early stages of the pandemic and in the first few months of the project.

As a result of the pandemic and the online delivery of university courses, the University Good Life Project was able to offer support to students who were not currently living in Cambridge or weren't able to travel to the UK before their courses began. This resulted in the project having a wider reach and delivering support to students who were very isolated and disconnected from their course and university life.

Student reach

The University Good Life Project was accessible to all students from both universities, and attracted a diverse range of students of all ages and nationalities. The project supported those who were living overseas, studying remotely from a wide range of countries including Nigeria, France, China, Japan, Azerbaijan, Slovakia, India, the USA and many more. The project was also able to offer students support and social connection while they were required to self-isolate or quarantine due to Covid-19. Student attendees came from different backgrounds, were studying a wide range of courses and were able to learn from each other's stories, interests and skills, whilst gaining peer support.

The University Good Life Project appealed to and reached international students, mature students and postgraduate students in particular.

Theming the Good Mood Cafes and Open Door calm spaces

In July 2020 the University Good Life Project was adapted, based on feedback from students, to include 'themes' for each online Open Door calm space and Good Mood Cafe at ARU. Theming the sessions was thought to assist with the promotion of the project and attract more students to sign up for sessions. By introducing themes, it was thought students would have a clearer understanding of what to expect and what they may gain from attending a session. Since theming the sessions, student attendance increased by 322%. Due to the success of the themes at ARU, the project adapted to theme sessions at UoC as well.

Examples of the themed sessions:

Good Mood Cafe

- Managing study and social life balance
- Coping with assignment and deadline stress
- How to cope with loneliness
- Creativity and wellbeing
- The five ways to wellbeing
- Imposter syndrome
- Create a wellbeing plan

Open Door calm space

- Dealing with negative thoughts
- Self-compassion
- Body image and self-acceptance
- Tune into your body
- Visualise your calm space
- Gratitude
- Mindfulness: back to the basics

Co-production

Student societies were invited to attend the Good Mood Cafes and to facilitate sessions based on topics that were important or relevant to their society.

The University Good Life Project team also worked closely with ARU's Student Peer Mentors who helped co-facilitate sessions on wellbeing topics that resonated with them, sharing their own experiences and skills. These were successful collaborations at ARU and led to increased attendance to these sessions.

Examples of collaborations with student societies:

- Eco-anxiety: Conversations with ARU's Sustainability Society
- Conversations with the Mental Wellbeing Society

Examples of sessions co-facilitated by Student Peer Mentors:

- Can plants improve your wellbeing?
- The importance of self-care on wellbeing
- Self-compassion

In addition to working alongside ARU's Student Peer Mentors and Student Societies, CPSL Mind recruited five student volunteers; three ARU students and two UoC students.

The student volunteers supported the project by adapting and developing the sessions, co-facilitating the Good Mood Cafes and Open Door calm spaces, promoting the project, networking with student reps, societies and colleges, attending and contributing to project team meetings and giving a student perspective.

To promote the University Good Life Project offer, the student volunteers produced a short video. See link to video here: <https://bit.ly/3ByFfSe>

Timing of project

The University Good Life Project launched in May 2020, nearing the end of the academic term and during exam time for students, and continued over the summer holidays with limited engagement from students. The learning from this has been that there could have been more engagement from students if the project launched in September, at the beginning of a new academic year.

Sign-ups vs attendance rate

The University Good Life Project received a higher number of sign-ups for sessions compared to the number of students who then attended the sessions. In particular, for the UoC sessions.

Possible reasons for this include:

- students too busy with other commitments.
- anxiety of attending a new group online.
- lack of clarity of what to expect in a session.
- students under extreme academic pressure.
- time and day of delivery not suitable.
- students forgot that they had signed up.
- students decided it was not for them.

Regular attendees

Although the project did see regular attendees to sessions at both ARU and UoC, these were in smaller numbers than expected.

Engagement from the University of Cambridge

The University Good Life Project faced many challenges in engaging and reaching the student population at the UoC. Despite significant and extensive promotional activity, numbers of UoC students attending the sessions remained low throughout the duration of the project.

This was likely to be due to several factors, including but not exclusively related to the collegiate system of the University of Cambridge. This presented challenges as the project team needed to build relationships with individual colleges to reach students, due to a lack of a centralised system. There are thirty-one separate Cambridge colleges with no centralised wellbeing team and CPSL Mind were informed students tend to engage in events at college level. This engagement process at college level was felt to be time consuming and resulted in less student engagement from students at the University overall.

ARU has a central wellbeing team, communications team and Student Union and CPSL Mind were able to quickly build strong relationships with key contacts who represent the entire University and student population.

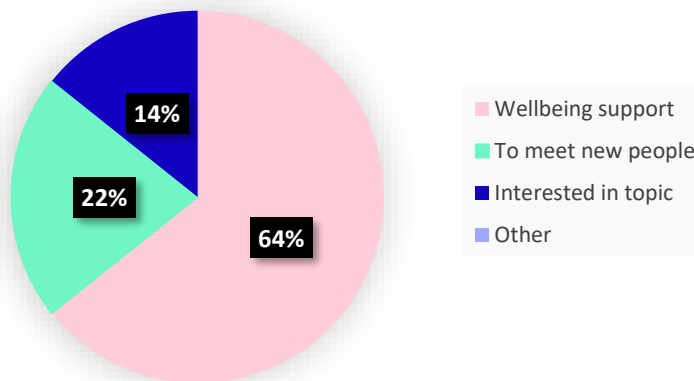
ARU Student wellbeing information phone line

A wellbeing information phone line was trialled at ARU in place of the in-person information sessions outlined in the original proposal. The phone line offered students wellbeing support from CPSL Mind staff. This support wasn't taken up by the student community and received very few calls and, as a result, the phone line was discontinued after 7 months.

Student feedback survey

Feedback was collected from a survey sent to ARU students who had signed up to attend an Open Door calm space or Good Mood Cafe. The results were as follows:

1) What attracted you to sign up to these sessions?



2) Please state anything else that led you to sign up to the wellbeing sessions.

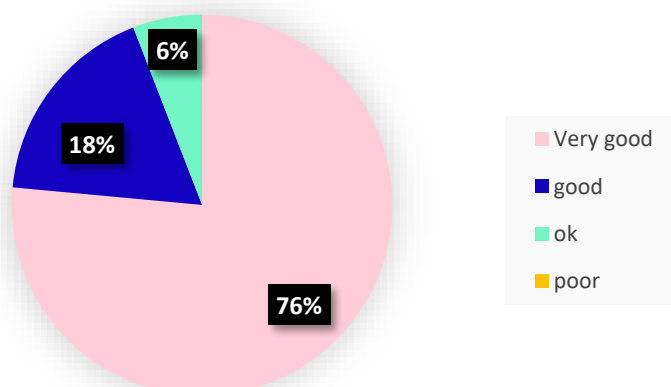
Main themes taken from survey answers:

- To learn tips to look after own wellbeing and mental health
- To relax
- To meet others
- Learn and practice mindfulness
- Improve own wellbeing and gain support
- Social interaction to tackle loneliness
- To learn more about CPSL Mind

3) If you signed up but then didn't attend a session can you tell us, why?

The most common answer was 'I have been too busy'.

4) What was your experience of the Good Mood Cafes/ Open Door calm spaces delivered by CPSL Mind and ARU this year?



5) What did you like most about the Good Mood Cafes or Open Door calm space sessions?

Main themes taken from survey answers:

- People were sincere and willing to help
- Open and relaxing safe space
- Welcoming and friendly atmosphere
- Everyone listened
- Nice to meet others
- Easy to access
- Facilitated well
- Range of different people in sessions
- Really good exercises

Popular Open Door calm space exercises:

Visualisation exercises, movement meditations and body scans.

6) How could the Good Mood Cafes/ Open Door calm spaces be improved for next year?

Main themes taken from survey answers:

- More activities and variety of exercises and topics
- Clearer message on what sessions are about so students understand concept and attend
- More craft related sessions
- Sessions to be a mixture of chat, activities and exercises
- More sessions available, so students can attend around studying
- Sessions to be spread out more across the week
- Reminder emails to be sent prior to sessions
- Clear plan of the content of sessions to be sent beforehand and summary afterwards
- More promotion of sessions, so more students know about the project
- Shorter Open Door calm space and more frequent

7) What topics would you like to see covered at the Good Mood Cafes/ Open Door calm spaces next year?

Main themes taken from survey answers:

- How to manage pressure and stress
- What does wellbeing look like worldwide?
- Addiction issues
- Loneliness
- Self-compassion
- Procrastination and reason behind this
- How to deal with conflict and difficulties in relationships
- How to have difficult conversations

- Networking and sharing ideas
- Tips on how to focus
- Mindfulness
- How to stay positive
- Outdoor activities
- How to stay calm and confident when dealing with criticism
- How to manage time on social media
- Techniques to deal with stress and anxiety

8) What else would you like to see offered by CPSL Mind and ARU to support student wellbeing?

Main themes taken from survey answers:

- Drop in sessions where CPSL Mind talk about their work as an organisation
- Activities offered outside of 9-5
- Information about opportunities to volunteer with CPSL Mind
- Regular meditations
- Outdoor activities e.g. yoga, Pilates
- In-person sessions
- Hearing feedback from students having received support helps

Student feedback quotes



Student case studies

Case study 1

“I’m really grateful that you hold these classes and that they’re free and so easy to drop-in. It was a lot more intimate than I was expecting but also probably a good thing as it kept me off my phone. And I really didn’t think one session would make much difference - but the last couple of days I’ve felt locked in an increasingly venomous cage and it was like being set free!! Has completely turned my day around.

I think for me, the visualisation one was definitely the most helpful. But maybe all three worked in synergy, with the body scan being more like prep.

I just felt a switch flick towards the end of seeing all those thoughts continuously float off on leaves and it was a huge relief. Like going into a trance and being able to come back to feeling more myself again - magic!”

Nia Davies, Student at University of Cambridge

Case study 2

“The University Open Door calm space sessions instantly grew on me as I am, and have been, going through a difficult period in my life, especially in regard to my family. The fact that my plans in the UK have been drastically changed and I had to come back to my home country didn’t help either. Being so overwhelmed in everyday life is very tiring and therefore I like taking part in these sessions the most.

It is only one hour a week and so it does not really have a direct effect on each and every day of my life, but it helps in reminding me to stay calm and grounded. I did find a noticeable difference in how I approach stressful situations when I do attend these sessions and when I don’t. The presence of something that helps me stay calm and relaxed has a big effect on how I process emotions and deal with stress overall.

Another important part for me was that these exercises helped me to approach my emotions that are usually otherwise locked away. It is also great that there is no overload of exercises or anything like that, and therefore I can handle the amount of emotions that come to the surface in that moment.

Also, to not only be able to practice these techniques myself, but to present them to my friends and to teach them how to do them themselves, these sessions and wider project is helping on much larger scale than might first seem.

The Good Mood Cafe is a nice and safe place to discuss anything that we can really think about. To be able to speak about problems of all sorts without fear of being judged is something very special in nowadays world.

Overall, this has had a very positive impact on not only my life, but life of my friends and family. By enabling me to stay calm and relaxed even under stressful situations and conditions, my friends and family draw this peace from me and are able to cope better than they otherwise would have”.

Róbert Hodja, MSc Clinical Child Psychology student, ARU Cambridge

Case study 3

“To improve my communication skills and engage in conversation, I joined the Good Mood Cafe, which was recommended by the Student Union. I still remember when I first attended the service, I was amazed by their generosity and enthusiasm. I now feel extremely cheerful, as I had not been enjoying group conversation for a long time and experienced guilty feelings for not taking pleasure in talking.

I must express my gratitude to CPSL Mind for helping me gain inner peace and tackle stereotypes. I hope my experience will help those who are struggling with similar problems”.

Xiaomeng Zhang, International student at the University of Cambridge

Feedback from project team

My involvement has been very positive, I've been lucky enough to have been involved in many aspects, seeing the project develop and the relationship between ARU and CPSL Mind grow in such a positive way. The project has reached out to many students, including those hard to reach and those that may not normally choose to interact. I've had the opportunity first-hand to hear students talk about the positives the project has had on them... feeling of wellbeing support, feeling of connectivity, better understanding of resources available to them. Thank you so much for a partnership which has worked well since day one and throughout the project. The partnership has achieved positive outcomes in many different areas.

Emma Stokes, Peer Wellbeing Mentor Manager, ARU

“I've really enjoyed seeing the relationship between Mind and ARU develop - and the power of partnerships! It was frustrating that this relationship didn't develop with the University of Cambridge, despite everyone's best efforts”.

Diane Lane, Change Agent, Southern Alliance

“Our experience has been a positive one. Working alongside dedicated professionals to ensure our students have a range of support options. During lockdown this partnership has proved invaluable in reducing isolation and reaching 'hard to reach' students. The Good Mood Cafes have been excellent. I am proud of the collaborative relationship between ARU and (CPSL) Mind”.

Suzanne Drieu, Counselling and Wellbeing Service Manager, ARU

“It has been an incredibly positive experience for me to be involved in the University Good Life Project, a total privilege to see the impact of collaborative working between Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge University, the Primary Care Networks, GPs and CPSL Mind. The project has been an example of best practice partnership working”.

Jo Clarke, Community and Partnerships Manager, CPSL Mind

Conclusion

The University Good Life Project has been a 14 month project developed and delivered by CPSL Mind in partnership with Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), the University of Cambridge (UoC), the Cantab and Cam Medical Primary Care Network and local GPs.

The aims of the project were to increase students' social connections and circles of support, increase wellbeing and self-care of students accessing the Good Mood Cafes, information sessions and Open Door calm spaces, and to increase students' knowledge of where to access support.

The key outcomes for the University Good Life Project have been met successfully (see table below), with ample learning and recovery from challenges along the way. The impact of the project has been demonstrated through the feedback from students and the project team, case studies and the statistical data which evidences learning and improved wellbeing.

The University Good Life Project increased circles of support for students during the Covid-19 pandemic, a difficult time in which loneliness and isolation were prevalent. The Good Mood Cafes offered spaces for students to connect with each other virtually throughout the lockdown period which increased the wellbeing and self-care of students who attended, evidenced through feedback and case studies. Students benefitted from learning the self-help techniques through attending Open Door calm spaces, evidenced through case studies and repeat attendance.

Outcome	Met	Evidence
Increase in students' social connections and circles of support	✓	Zoom poll results showed students felt more connected to others since joining the Good Mood Cafe. Case studies and feedback show an increase in students' social connection from attending.
Increase in wellbeing and self-care of students accessing the Good Mood Cafes, Open Door calm spaces and information sessions	✓	Zoom poll results and qualitative evidence showed students felt more relaxed after attending sessions, learnt new skills to contribute to their wellbeing and reported they would practice these skills outside the sessions.
Increase in students' knowledge of where to access support	✓	Qualitative evidence in the form of student feedback show that this outcome has been met

A strong partnership between ARU and CPSL Mind has been established as a result of this project, leading to a clear sustainability commitment from both organisations to develop the University Good Life Project offer building on the learning from year one. Additional funding from ARU and a match funded grant from the Evelyn Trust has been secured which will enable the University Good Life Project to offer support to ARU students via a mixture of online and face to face delivery, for the next academic year (2021/22)

References

"Virtual Platforms Are Helpful Tools but Can Add to Our Stress". Psychology Today. Retrieved February 25, 2021