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Using positive thinking to find work and self-worth

A series of free workshops is using cognitive behavioural therapy to help people believe in themselves

ONE TUESDAY morning in late September, 14 unconnected people of all ages, genders and nationalities walked into the library in Talaght in Dublin hoping to turn their lives around.

Several hours later, they emerged as a cohesive group, feeling energised, enthusiastic and more positive about life than they had for a long time.

Unemployment brought this group together and a free one-day workshop in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) run by Veronica Walsh, managing director of CBT and Feeling Good, lifted their expectations and filled them with hope.

CBT is a well established psycho-educational therapy often used to treat anxiety disorder. It teaches people to understand and manage their thoughts, emotions and behaviour and to replace negative, limiting thoughts and behaviour with positive, opportunity-seeking actions. By debunking unfounded anxieties, faulty interpretations and feelings of worthlessness people can have a more positive outlook.

Now CBT and Feeling Good approved training programmes and trainers have been placed on the FÁS and Enterprise Ireland national register of trainers, and free workshops will be offered to people keen to enter the workforce but are anxious about their prospects.

This approach works well in the UK where CBT has been offered through Jobcentres since 2009 on the recommendation of the London School of Economics and the Institute of Psychiatry. A study undertaken by the Institute found that, "significantly more of the CBT group than the control group improved on measures of mental health, as well as on success in job-finding; indicating the value of psychological interventions in reducing the negative psychological effects of unemployment, and helping the unemployed find jobs".

As well as offering a lifeline, the initiative is proving cost effective. Britain's former work and pensions secretary James Purnell confirmed that "while there are short-term costs, we expect the programme to save money in the long term by helping people back into work, cutting the benefit bill and lowering costs in the NHS".

Walsh's approach encourages each group to enjoy the camaraderie of meeting like-minded people and equips them with CBT tools they can use to dis-

pel unsupported negative beliefs. Participants quickly learn to look for solutions rather than focusing on the causes of their difficulties. Her workshops are fun too.

"If you come to something called coping skills for the unemployed, the likelihood is that you're feeling a bit anxious. I don't lecture at people or do group therapy. Instead, it's an enjoyable, discovery-based, interactive experience that involves lots of laughter as well as learning," she says.

People's circumstances differ. Walsh characterises a typical group: "There might be someone from a socially disadvantaged area who has never worked; someone who works intermittently; someone who has been made redundant; or someone who has taken a career break, perhaps to raise a family."

What they have in common, she says, "is the way they are processing and interpreting their life situation and the fact that this is leading to a belief that they have to stay in their box. They feel worthless. Their confidence has been chipped away and they may have no expectations at all.

"They feel let down by elements of the media that have characterised them as welfare scroungers lying on the sofa eating grapes and refusing to accept a minimum wage job. That's simply untrue. They're trying to survive. They're here to change but they're terrified to get back out there and face an interview panel or walk into an unfamiliar workplace."

CBT helps people to regain a sense of calm and confidence and an ability to recognise their talents even in our difficult jobs market. Walsh describes how she "might ask 'What is your skill-set?' and be told, 'I have no skill set'".

"It's my job to help people examine that thinking and realise that there's no evidence backing up these feelings of worthlessness. The realisation that they're not thinking rationally is huge – like a light bulb coming on. It's very re-

warding." Each participant leaves with a workbook, a reading list and access to online self-help tools.

Walsh stresses the need to "challenge your own hardwired thinking and behaviour over and over again. Like anything else you have to practise. You can't learn to ride a bike by reading a book about it."

The reaction of participants is perhaps the best testament to the success of the workshop. When asked what they got out of the session, responses included: "The possibility of changing my world by changing myself", "It made me believe that I am valuable", "The rationalisation of my irrational thoughts" and a new-found feeling of being "alive and energetic".

For more information about CBT and details of future free workshops visit cbtandfeelinggood.com, read Veronica Walsh's blog at <http://iveronicawalsh.wordpress.com/> or e-mail Walsh at info@cbtandfeelinggood.com

ELEANOR FITZSIMONS



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