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'The community is standing up to depression': why a charity is training 'mental health first aiders' in Wales

In the Welsh ex-mining town of Ystradgynlais, a grassroots mental health campaign is having remarkable effects on the local rugby community and beyond

by Sophie Goddard

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By now, most of us are all too familiar with the stats surrounding mental health: one in four of us experience mental health problems each year, while one in three of us don't feel like we have the tools to deal with the ups and downs of life.

Conversations about the way we discuss mental health are shifting, but for the former mining town of Ystradgynlais in Powys, Wales, change is well overdue. Powys currently has the highest suicide rate in Wales, with somebody dying in this way every three and a half weeks. It's why last year, Ystradgynlais Mind, an affiliate of national mental health charity Mind, created the #ItTakesBallsToTalk campaign, featuring the voice of the actor Michael Sheen in the campaign video, to prompt discussion around mental health within the community. It was the brainchild of Ystradgynlais Mind chief executive Carol Stephens, Ystradgynlais Mind project manager Donna James, who wrote and produced the video, and Yogits rugby team player, Andrew Morgan-Jones.



"#ItTakesBallsToTalk was a project designed to remove stigma around mental health," says James. "We don't want people suffering in silence, we want to encourage a narrative where it's less alien to say: 'I am not OK' and to normalise the conversation around it. We have the resources to help and there is scope for recovery if people can speak their minds when facing mental anguish."

The realisation saw Stephens come up with the idea of bringing support to those in need, instead of waiting for them to ask. "We knew we had to try something completely different," she says. "It's a close-knit community here and rugby is a pseudo religion – the rugby clubs have taken the place of community centres and form a centre of support for their respective communities. So I proposed we train coaches, referees and guys from the local rugby clubs as 'mental health first aiders', to have parity of esteem with physios at the clubs. It's like one of them said to us: 'We have first aiders to help with torn hamstrings and dislocated fingers, but what about the mind?'"

I am now an advocate for building positive mental health within rugby clubs



The initiative means free training is given to local rugby clubs to create their own mental health first aiders, supported by Ystradgynlais Mind. "The first aiders are best placed to notice any changes in behaviour, like self-neglect, drinking more or becoming withdrawn," says Stephens. "The first aiders then have the knowledge and skills to facilitate conversations, with Ystradgynlais Mind on hand to provide support or referrals to counsellors if needed." All are welcome to be trained as mental health first aiders, or to seek advice from one: "Wives, mothers, sisters and friends of these clubs, are all directly benefiting from the support we offer," says James. "Irrespective of gender, race, sexual orientation, political views or religion, it is a rugby family, and it is inclusive. I think that's one of the most powerful things about this project."

Proper funding has been an integral part of the campaign's success. As a Co-op charity partner, the initiative has recently received £48,250 to carry on and expand the great work that has happened to date. The funding will also allow the training to be rolled out beyond rugby, with plans to train mental health first aiders in spaces such as barbers, hairdressers, football and golf clubs, too. "We also want to support supporters, enabling as many people as possible to be trained in mental health first aid, until it's as commonplace as CPR training," says Stephens.

Gareth Brookes, 34, plays second row for the Abercrae Barbarians rugby club, and has recently begun his first aider training through #ItTakesBallsToTalk. As someone who has battled depression and anxiety himself, he's proud to be a shoulder for teammates who may be struggling: "We want to help break the stigma around admitting you're struggling with your mental health," says Brookes. "While we will be on-hand to listen, we're not there to become full-time counsellors. We're there to start conversations about mental health among our teams, encourage the guys to speak up and to direct them towards professional help if they need it."

Morgan-Jones, who has completed his first-aid training, notes the ripple effect becoming trained in mental health awareness can have: "I am now an advocate for building positive mental health within rugby clubs and the broader community."



It's a sentiment that James echoes: "This form of early intervention is comforting to the whole community, who feel like they're part of finding a solution and perpetuating a positive culture change. The community is standing up to depression together, and judging by the spirit and passion of those I have personally met, I think it is a fight they are likely to win."



We want to help break the stigma around admitting you're struggling with your mental health

"The project has really been a grassroots initiative, with a pool of people from all walks of life trying to make a difference. Initially we had no formal funding and were entirely reliant on donations. We've since received funding from Co-op, which has allowed us to continue rolling out training in the way we hoped. We were overjoyed when that was granted. I find it incredible that a stranger in Co-op buying a loaf of bread has the capacity to save a life here in Ystradgynlais."

Co-op is working with Mind, SAMH and Inspire to bring communities together to improve mental wellbeing. To find out more and how you can support visit here

- In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org.
- Contact Mind for information and support in England and Wales on 0300 123 3393 or email info@mind.org.uk. Lines open 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday.
- Contact SAMH (Scottish Association for Mental Health) for information and support in Scotland on 0344 800 0550 or email info@samh.org.uk. Lines open 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday. Closed bank holidays.
- Call Inspire for information and support in Northern Ireland on 0289 032 8474. Lines open 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. Closed bank holidays.

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