

The 'positive steps' now helping mental health shake its stigma

IN 2015, the list of taboo subjects skirted around out of fear, confusion or even apathy is waning away.

We can all remember a time when topics like sexuality and religion would be met with awkward responses, and often kept out of social circles.

While society may have become a more open place, it is only in very recent years one subject – affecting millions of people in this country every year – has finally been breached. And that is mental health.

Last week was Mental Health Week across the UK, designed not only to raise awareness of the services people need, be it through depression, stress, OCD or anything similar, but also boost understanding among the wider public of what those people are going through.

Under Gordon Brown's stewardship, the services available through the NHS were increased nationally and have stayed that way, while techniques like mindfulness have found their way onto the nation's bookshelves, from self-help guides to adult colouring books.

I went to find out more about the state of play for support in North Somerset, which has been delivered by a group called Positive Step since 2008.

HOW IT WORKS

I met up with Positive Step's service manager, Ted Riley, in a small room at the back of The Coast Resource Centre near Worle railway station, where the group is based.

There was a whiteboard on the wall, with four words written on it – thoughts, behaviours, emotions and body. The four were all linked together with arrows, and form part of a technique called cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), something Ted told me was at the core of changing people's mindsets.

He said: "You can affect your thinking in different ways; sometimes it is difficult to address your thoughts directly. So you might change your actions, which will have a knock-on effect.

"It might be someone afraid of going to a bar because someone could sit next to them. We go there and face it, and then go to the next stage.

"CBT is probably the best researched technique out there. It's like watching a scary film; the first time you see it, you might jump 10 times. The next time, it might be five, and every time you expose

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yourself to it, it falls.

"We want people to know there is help available. Less than a decade ago, people would have to pay for any sessions they were having. But things have changed for the better.

"With our group sessions, if you are feeling worried about things but meet people in the same boat, you won't feel as frightened or alone.

"We average around 350-400 referrals a month. It's for everybody, sometimes there is an assumption it's just for younger people – our eldest patient is 92."

While understanding of mental health is improving and the stigma surrounding it beginning to fall away, Ted said there is still a fear about taking that step to get help when it is needed.

He said: "The hardest thing is for someone to pick up the phone in the first place. We also go into GP surgeries or the healthy living centres. If people want a course of therapy, it lasts six to 12 sessions and it's very effective.

"There is still a long way to go in mental health treatment. If you pull a muscle, you would go to see a physio, not let it get worse until it is taking over your life.

"I want mental health to have that same routine of treatment. People think about hospitals and drugs, but it's much more than that. Really it's making it normal, because from time to time everyone needs a bit of support.

"We have volunteers working with people too, most of whom have been treated themselves at some point – it helps both sides, it feels nice to be a part of it and give something back."

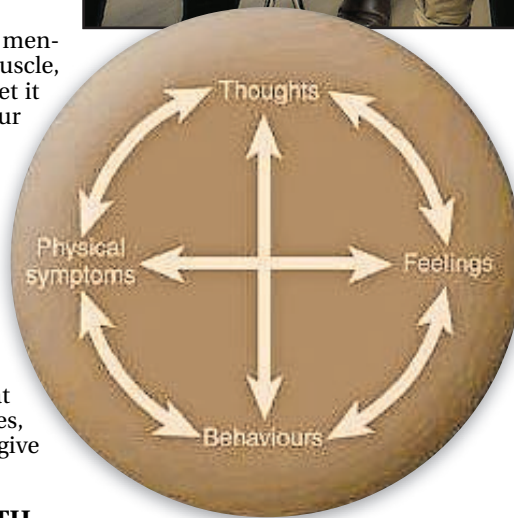
LIVING WITH MENTAL HEALTH

Ted introduced me to one of the volunteers at the centre, who asked to remain nameless, who had lifted themselves out of depression with the help of Positive Step, before wanting to remain involved and give something back.

They said: "I've lived a very eventful life really. I was bullied badly at work, more than once, but working as a health professional I found it difficult to accept



▲ A group therapy session in progress.

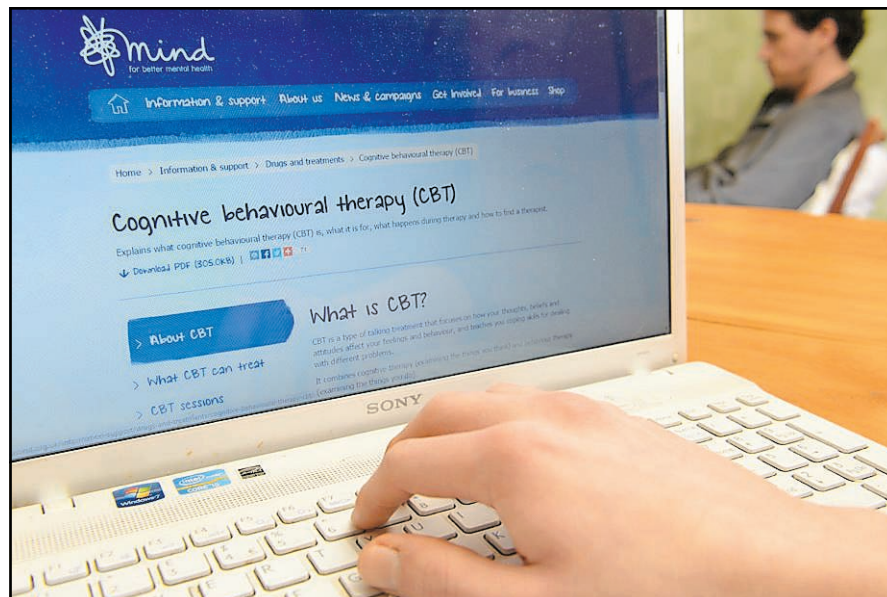


▲ The 'hot-cross bun' model of cognitive behavioural therapy.

Getting Involved:

If you need the assistance of Positive Step, free and confidentially, you can refer yourself by calling 03003 000834, get a referral through your GP or sign up for a course at www.positivestep.org.uk.

Alternatively, if you would like to help volunteer to work with people to give them confidence to join a course, or help deliver the course yourself, visit the website or call 01934 523766.



▲ Searching for help.

that as someone helping to deliver care I could need it too.

"After I retired, I was in a good place and happy to be away from everything. My family was financially stable and I took up various things to keep me busy, but then a very good friend died and it just hit me. I went downhill for the next three years.

"What brought me to realise I had to do something was my spouse retiring too. I realised I was squandering not only my life but theirs. They went on holiday on their own once because of the panic I would have had we gone together.

"I went to my GP and said I needed help, but had no interest in drugs. He told me to try Positive Step but I thought CBT was a load of rubbish at the time, but what else was there – I might as well try it.

"I met my therapist and she introduced me to the idea of changing my thoughts, which might sound obvious. She gave me some homework for the first few weeks but I never understood it, and after a few weeks said 'we'll do this on your terms.'

"I soon had a list of things to achieve, and some real goals to follow. Since then I've gone from being someone who didn't ever want to go on holiday to driving to Barcelona in my little car last year.

"Instead of worrying about things, I can just think 'what's the worst that could happen?' – I think it confuses my other half a little bit."

salonforsale



The salon comprises of two floors with an office/beauty room, a kitchen and two toilets, as well as eight working stations and two basins. Fully equipped with all fittings, the large premises are ideal as a training or teaching facility. It also has two outside courtyards.

It comes with the present Cottage salon with seating for seven. Comprising of three basins and a disabled toilet, which has been established for 30 years.

Bridgwater is going to be a thriving town shortly as a new Power Station is being built at Hinkley Point. This is an ideal business/investment opportunity which comes with a three year lease (which is negotiable).

Interested parties should write to: **Ken Baker, Ken Baker Hair Designers, 45a High Street, Bridgwater TA6 3BG**

Alternatively t: 01278 450832 or e: bakeraken@yahoo.co.uk