

**NOELA YOGA
10 WEEK MINDFULNESS BASED YOGA
COURSE EVALUATION**

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Penal Reform Solutions



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1.0 WHO WE ARE

Penal Reform Solutions (PRS) is an organisation that focuses on transforming penal culture, creating spaces that are meaningful, trusting and nurturing. PRS strives to change the conversation around punishment, working with practitioners and service users and making them central to the change process. It is an evidence-based organisation, which draws on academic research, practitioners' expertise, and the experiences of people who have served a prison sentence. PRS has extensive experience in growth, professionalism and relationship work in correctional environments and specialises in service user involvement, supporting a variety of institutions within the criminal justice system. PRS's work is informed by research carried out in the Norwegian prison system, and it uses this knowledge to support organisations to promote humanity, relationships and hope, in order to reduce social harm and promote social good, for all.



Message to trainers, from the MBY Manual;

“May every reader, whoever teaches it or participates in the course, find peace in your lives. May MBY be with you every day. May your love shine out into the world and for you to receive it back a 1000 times over. May you teach the course, with integrity, honesty and passion. May all participants receive your wisdom and the gift you are granting them. May you find hope and give it to others. May they receive your gift and transform their lives with it. My love, energy and thoughts are with you all, blessing to you always”.

Noel Moran- creator of the MBY Course

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to summarise the emerging findings associated with Noela Yoga, a 10-week mindfulness-based yoga course, which is currently being delivered to residents at HMP Swaleside. This specialised course integrates desistance and growth theory with mindfulness and yoga, to support identity transformation and personal development. Four Noela Yoga courses are scheduled to take place at Swaleside and this report highlights the impact of the course on residents after the delivery of two courses. Questionnaires were collated and analysed to assess the impact the course had on residents, both physically and mentally.

3.0 NOELA YOGA

Noela Yoga was developed by Noel Moran in 2016 while he was serving a life sentence. Noel is a self-taught yoga teacher and has been practicing yoga since 2008 and has used the combination of his own Mindfulness Based Yoga with his custodial experience to develop a 10-week programme based around his own lived experience and mentoring people with complex needs. The programme focuses upon mental health, suicide and self-harm, trauma, PTSD, breaking habits and sleep patterns and the Principles of Growth from PRS’s extensive research in the Norwegian prison system.

The purpose of the course is to provide opportunities for residents to find themselves, unlock potential, reduce stress, fears and worries, develop self-rehabilitation and support the development of new identities and find a sense of belonging.. The aim ultimately is to contribute to a safe environment where people can express themselves; ‘search inwards, find yourself and reflect.’

The objectives of Noela Yoga are to promote a rehabilitative climate, improve physical and mental health, provide tools to develop life skills, support a sense of belonging and provide tools to help manage emotions and relieve stress and anxiety.



3.1 REFLECTIONS FROM THE AUTHOR AND FACILITATOR OF NOELA YOGA

“When I wrote this programme I just became a qualified level 4 yoga teacher. I had already had thousands of hours teaching experience between staff and residents. I wrote the programme in my cell at HMP Guys Marsh with the intention that one day I would bring it back to prisons and help people who have been through what I have been through, to better themselves, inspire and give them hope.

I started the first two cohorts on the 14th April 2022 at HMP Swaleside, exactly a year after being released from prison myself. From my observations of both programmes, it was fascinating to see the men grow and develop together and be a part of a journey, building a sense of community.

The residents were able to find a safe space where they could talk about their trauma and difficulties of prison life. They found a deep sense of gratitude and acceptance in their situation, where at the beginning they held a lot of anger and mistrust towards staff and the system. At the end of each session they were at peace with themselves and always looked forward to the next session. It was an honour to see a programme I wrote myself in a time of darkness come alive and bring lightness to people, who are going through what I have gone through.” Noel Moran

4.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will investigate functionality of yoga and mindfulness in prisons as a mode of rehabilitation and to discover the usefulness of such programmes, for example Noela Yoga within the prison setting. The review will focus on four key areas that are specifically relevant to those incarcerated: mental health, substance abuse, aggression and violence and ultimately recidivism.

Currently, in-prison psychiatric assistance is predominantly medication (Sharma et al, 2013) with some behavioural therapies (Himmelstein, 2011), which in turn already uses some techniques of

mindfulness and meditation (Segal et al, 2002). Studies of the effectiveness of yoga and mindfulness on reducing the negative effects of mental health problems of those incarcerated have been promising (Chandiriramani et al 1998; Auty, 2017). Yoga and mindfulness programmes alone have exhibited a positive influence on symptoms relating to depression, anxiety, (Banerjee et al, 2007) and PTSD (Van der Kolk, 2014). Additionally, such methods can be used in combination with current treatments such pharmacotherapy to improve mental wellbeing therefore demonstrating its adjunctive values for some conditions such as schizophrenia and ADHD (Balasubramaniam et al, 2013).

Yoga and Mindfulness works in a way that helps reduce stress levels (Bilderbeck, 2013) as well as enhancing stress tolerance. It does this by connecting individuals to themselves, giving them control over their body and the way that they feel (Salmon et al, 2019). Since lack of control over one's anatomy has been linked to elevated levels of stress (Joblin 2009), it is reasonable to suggest that an increase in said control will amount to a lowering in stress levels. Since yoga practice helps individuals build awareness of their own emotions and develop skills to deal with more negative ones, it could also be effective in reducing stresses caused by difficult relationships and circumstances within the prison through an improved understanding around how to maintain self-control and strength in such situations (Auty, 2017). Links between yoga and reduced cortisol levels have also been established by research. The chemical cortisol is released by the body as a reaction to stress and can exacerbate mental health problems. There is growing support that the meditation aspect of yoga can reduce the levels of cortisol hence, alleviating symptoms associated with mental illness (Ross and Thomas, 2010).

The physical assets of yoga and mindfulness have been widely studied, from maintaining good physical health to treating physical illness (Auty, 2017). Given the forced sedentary environment of incarceration, it is important that inmates partake in exercise to uphold physical wellbeing (Field, 2011). The exercise component of yoga makes it a particularly appropriate physical activity for custodial facilities because it can be carried out independently without the need for a great deal of



space (Baer, 2003). Research conducted to investigate the health benefits of mindfulness and yoga are favourable, with supporting evidence that it can help in cases of chronic pain (Chiesa and Serretti, 2001) and high blood pressure as well as acting as a preventative to the physical responses of stress (Thygeson et al, 2010). Developing new treatments for physical problems is of relevance to prison due to the ever-aging prison population (Crawley and Sparks, 2005), as well as the impact that the stressors of prison life have on pre-existing health conditions (Chiesa and Serretti, 2001). Current healthcare within prisons is inadequate and of great expense (Crawley and Sparks, 2005), therefore suggesting that mindfulness and yoga could be used as a method of treatment for the relevant health conditions.

The Principles of Growth were developed by Penal Reform Solutions (PRS) based upon research carried out by Dr Sarah Lewis in Norwegian Prisons. Figure 1 outlines the principles that are used at the forefront of all work carried out by PRS.

Noela Yoga incorporates these Principles of Growth throughout its practice.



Figure 1: Principles of Growth Wheel

5.0 HMP SWALESIDE

HMP Swaleside is a high security (Category B) male prison on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. It is part of the Sheppey Cluster, along with HMP Elmley and HMP Stanford Hill. The prison houses over 1000 residents across eight wings, with more than half of residents serving life sentences.

6.0 METHODOLOGY

Noela Yoga was delivered to two separate cohorts of residents at HMP Swaleside. Cohort one was made up of five participants and cohort two, made up of four participants. All participants were asked to complete pre, mid and post questionnaires.

26 questionnaires were collected in total, 12 pre-course evaluations, nine mid-point evaluations and five post evaluations. It should be noted that different participants completed these questionnaires over the course of the evaluation due to varying attendance levels and not all participants completed the questionnaires. This meant that score averages were possibly skewed as different individuals were present at these three evaluation points in the course. There were many factors that contributed to participants not completing the programme, which included some not being unlocked, regime changes, being placed in other workplaces and movement to other wings. This had an impact on the men not being able to complete the course. To address these issues a more collaborative approach on all parties involved would increase retention and engagement. Having an acknowledgement that the programme is a meaningful activity that will improve the resident's wellbeing is also recommended, which will lead to a better functioning of the prison.

At the end of each session the participants provided feedback, summarising how the specific focus of each session impacted them. Third party observations were also given from staff at HMP Swaleside and will be used as an ethnography to understand resident behaviours in the wider prison community for the final report, which is scheduled to be complete by November 2022.

A thematic analysis of the data has been conducted by PRS, to identify key themes associated with the impact of Noela Yoga on residents at HMP Swaleside, considering the physical and mental impacts on residents individually, as well as considering impacts on the wider community.

7.0 SAMPLE

15 participants took part in the MBY Course over a 10-week period. The age of the two cohorts ranged from 26-73 and the average age was 44. The ethnicity of the participants can be seen in

Figure 2, which highlights that most of the sample (69%) were White British, with a range of other ethnicities outlined.

A pie chart outlining the ethnicity of the participants

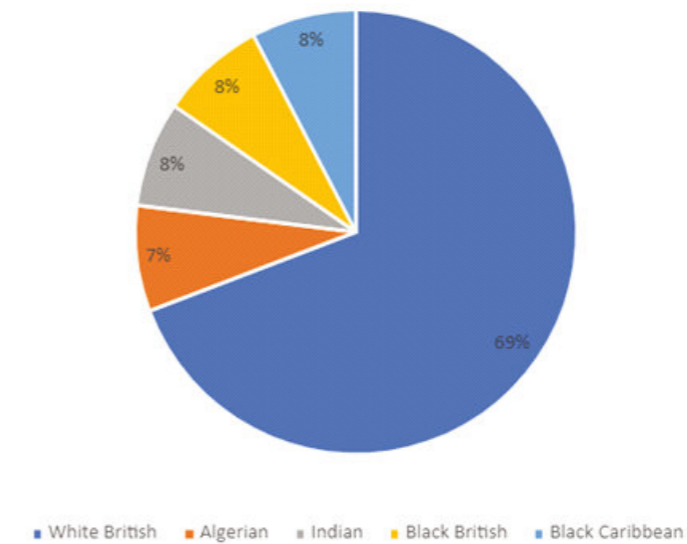


Figure 2: A pie chart outlining the ethnicity of the participants

The participants were asked to self-disclose the level of mental health concerns they were currently experiencing, and these are outlined in Figure three, highlighting that, for those who shared their mental health concerns, four out of 12 who had completed the evaluation stated that they had mental health concerns.

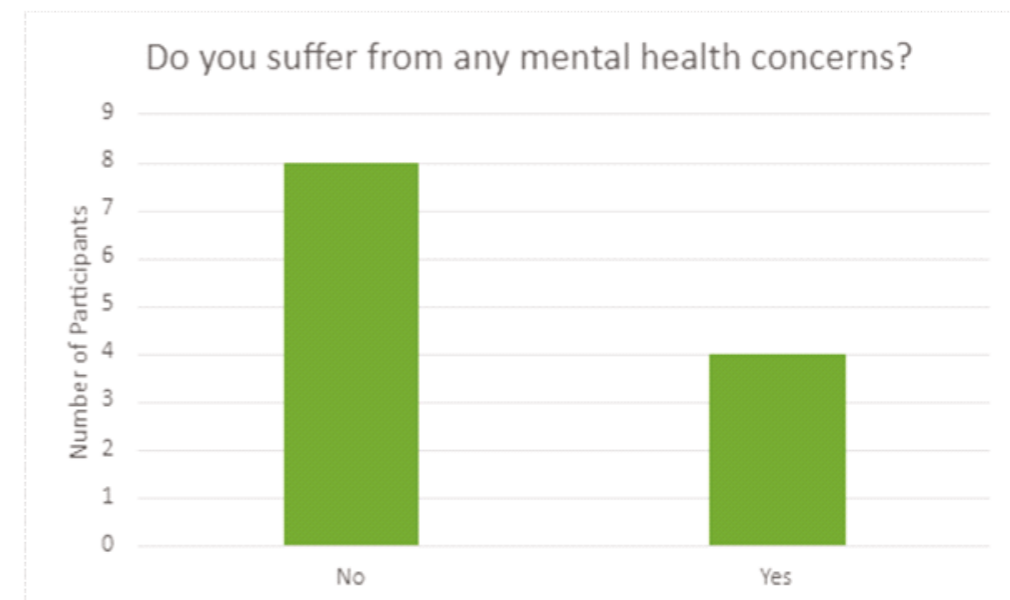


Figure 3: A bar chart outlining the self-disclosed mental health of the participants



7.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All participants at the post-course evaluation stage stated that they would recommend the course, with one participant stating that he would actively encourage others to join the next two cohorts, suggesting a sense of advocacy. To illustrate, one participant stated, “I am going to keep practicing and will hopefully get others involved along the way, thank you.”

Following a thematic analysis of the data set in its entirety, the following themes emerged.

7.1 MENTAL AND PHYSICAL WELLBEING - “I AM NOT IN PRISON IN MY MIND, I JUST LIVE LIFE”

The data suggests an emerging theme of an improved sense of mental and physical wellbeing. All participants stated that their mental health and physical wellbeing had improved over the duration of the course, and this was evident at the mid-point evaluation. To illustrate, one participant stated that there was “a lot of change” and this was generally evident, due to a reduction in negative thoughts at night. Another participant commented that their “mental health is completely destroyed... (I) feel bit better when I come here.” This suggests that the course created a safe space, temporarily alleviating mental health concerns, acting as a short relief to mental health problems, which they were experiencing on an everyday basis.

When exploring physical wellbeing with the participants, they acknowledged an improvement in their physical health consistently, with one participant noting less back pain, more flexibility, and another participating stating that they had recently returned to the gym, indicating an increase in motivation. For example, one participant stated;

“It has really helped my body – I can have sore muscles after sessions. The stretching has helped me, I find it easier to move about now... Stretching exercises really helps to ground me and helps with my back injury.”

At the post-evaluation stage, all participants commented that their mental and physical wellbeing had improved, reporting that they were experiencing several health benefits, which are explored as subthemes below. The findings also suggested that whilst some stated that their mental health was

“ok” when starting the course, it was evident that the course has helped them remain positive, with one participant stating; “it helps me maintain a positive mindset and a commitment.”

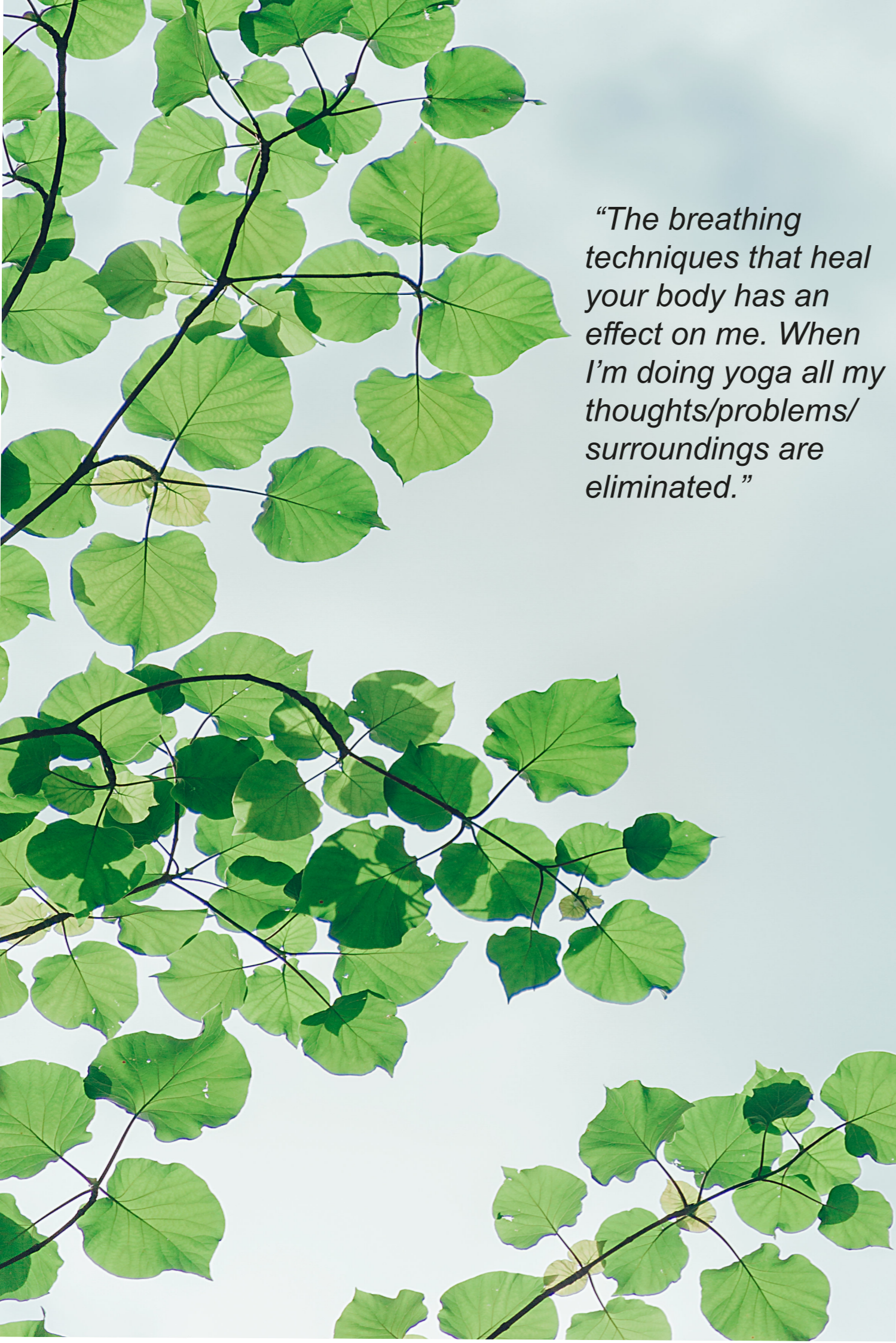
7.1.1 A SENSE OF PEACE AND CALMNESS - “IT HAS HELPED ME OUT OF A NEGATIVE HEAD SPACE”

There was an overwhelming and consistent sense that the participants enjoyed the course, its structure, and the learning that they received from participating. Some commented that it had a calming effect and acknowledged the therapeutic benefits. To illustrate, one member of the group stated, “I loved it, very beneficial, it’s therapeutic, calming and makes me feel good.” Participants acknowledged how the course relaxed them and reduced tension. For example, one participant stated, “I feel a lot more relaxed, I was quite tense before I started.” Others commented that the course had helped them mentally, with one participant stating, “it has helped me out of a negative head space.” Finally, one participant stated that the course has enabled them to “switch off” and reduce stress, which has brought with it a sense of ease and relaxation, which was new to them.

7.1.2 CHANGES IN SLEEP - “I HAD A PROBLEM SLEEPING DUE TO THOUGHTS, NOW THAT HAS STOPPED.”

When examining the data, the findings suggest that sleep was somewhat enhanced through the course participation. Whilst some initially described sleep as ‘OK, or ‘fine,’ overall, most participants indicated poor sleep, with one participant highlighting a difficulty in sleeping, in a prison environment, stating; “it’s hard to sleep in this place.” This can be further illustrated by another participant describing sleep as “disturbed.”

At the mid-point evaluation of the course, there was a slight improvement in the quality of sleep, with several participants acknowledging this as “better” or “much better”. Finally, a participant commented that the focus on relaxation has helped their sleep, through a greater ability to manage their thoughts, saying, “I had a problem sleeping due to thoughts, now that has stopped.” Overall, there is evidence to indicate that the course has had a positive effect on the quality of sleep for participants.



“The breathing techniques that heal your body has an effect on me. When I’m doing yoga all my thoughts/problems/surroundings are eliminated.”



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7.1.3 HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES - “THE BREATHING TECHNIQUES THAT HEAL YOUR BODY HAS AN EFFECT ON ME. WHEN I’M DOING YOGA ALL MY THOUGHTS/PROBLEMS/SURROUNDINGS ARE ELIMINATED.”

There was also some emerging evidence to suggest that the course has reduced anxiety for the participants, and reduced tension in a healthier way, using mindfulness, rather than resorting to self-harm. To illustrate, one participant stated, “I have learnt to release tension without trying to release it in a self-harm way.’ This suggests that healthier coping strategies have been adopted by some participants to manage their mental health and the psycho-educational elements of the course have helped participants to talk and share their views and problems.

For others, new coping strategies were adopted on the course that helped them in everyday life in prison, stating; “it shows me ways of coping with frustration which pop up frequently.” In addition, another participant referred to life outside of the group room and said, “This work helps me to conduct myself even better on the wing.” This suggests that practical skills have been developed by the participants, which are assisting them in their lives outside of the course, using the techniques and lessons from the course.

For one participant, the course had brought with it a sense of meaning and carved out a space where they can cope, within the current prison environment. For example, one participant stated the course; “brings a sense of purpose, a positive in this dark place”.

It was evident that the focus on breathing techniques throughout the course has assisted people and consequentially led to a greater sense of feeling grounded and focused, with one participant stating, “breathing techniques helps me sleep at night. Help me to focus and ground myself.” The breathing techniques introduced on the course supported their ability to cope, with another participant stating, “the breathing techniques that heal your body has an effect on me. When I’m doing yoga all my thoughts/problems/surroundings are eliminated.”



7.2 COGNITIVE CHANGE “MY SELF-TALK HAS BECOME POSITIVE. I USED TO CALL MYSELF AWFUL NAMES, BUT I’VE LEARNT TO STOP THAT.”

An emerging theme from the data highlighted that the course helped some participants address negative thinking patterns. For example, one participant reflected at the end of the course; “my self-talk has become positive. I used to call myself awful names, but I’ve learnt to stop that.” Another referred to a similar benefit, stating that breathing techniques “stop my thoughts and negative self-talk and paranoia. I love the space we have here in our yoga session, a place for us to be real and no egos.” This latter quote highlights a sense of community, with collaborative language evident and a real appreciation for having a safe space to grow, without agenda.

Figure 4 highlights that there was increased average score of participants over the duration of the course, when asked to reflect on how often they were mindful of their thoughts and actions.

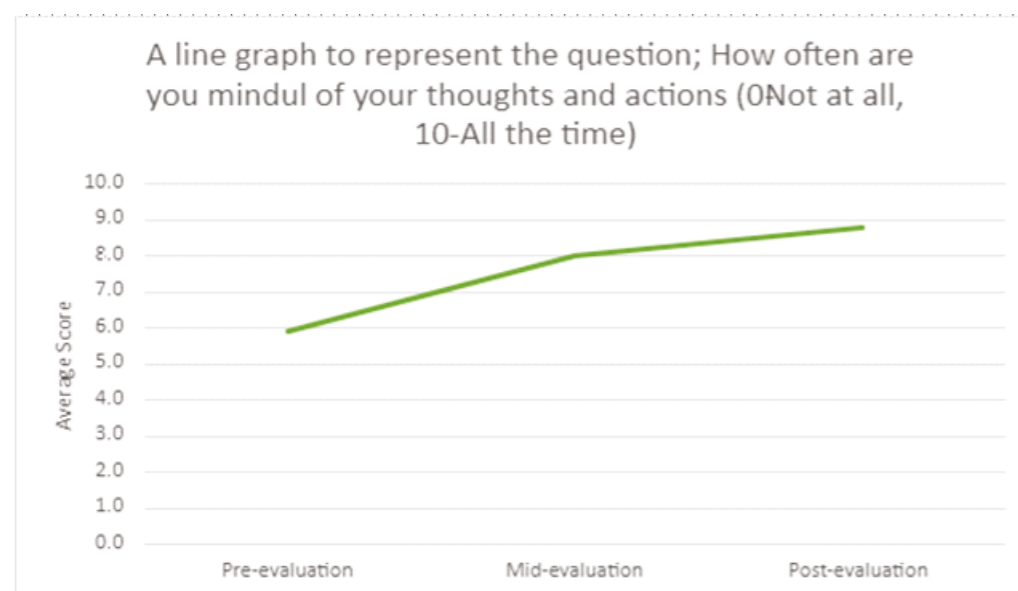


Figure 4: A line graph to represent the average response to the question; ‘How mindful are you on your thoughts and actions?’

7.3 COPING

The data suggested that participants used escapism, as a coping mechanism for ‘prison life’. One participant highlighted the thought of “freedom” or “keep busy” whilst some identified “drugs,” or “Xbox” as coping remedies. Others were less positive regarding their ability to cope with prison life, as indicated by one participant stating that they were “not able to.” There was evidence that undertaking activities and keeping

busy were helpful means to cope with prison life for most of the participants. This is illustrated by one participant stating that their strategy was “being busy” and another participant commenting theirs was “doing activities.”

Finally, some reflections in the post evaluation demonstrated a more proactive mindset, to cope with prison life, as exemplified by one participant stating they cope “[the] best I can, stay positive.’ There was evidence of an appreciation of the course, with another participant highlighting the benefits of this as a mechanism for coping with prison life “do activities - yoga.”

7.4 GRATITUDE

Participants consistently stated that they liked the facilitators and found them “professional,” “calm” and “very friendly”, articulated in the evaluations to the facilitators, thanking them for the experience and valuing them as individuals.

7.5 AWARENESS AND LEARNING “BEING AT PEACE WITH YOURSELF AND YOUR SURROUNDINGS AND USING IT TO FURTHER YOURSELF.”

Participants highlighted a greater awareness of mindfulness and the importance of mindfulness, within the context of wellbeing. For example, participants stated that they were unsure of what mindfulness is, though others showed some understanding, linking mindfulness to an awareness of the surroundings and an open mindedness. To illustrate one participant stated that mindfulness is “being in tune to my surrounding, connecting to an inner peace.” Following the completion of the programme, participants demonstrated a deeper understanding of mindfulness, associating it with a sense of peace and a “necessary part of relaxation.” One participant also highlighted how mindfulness can promote personal growth, stating, “Being at peace with yourself and your surroundings and using it to further yourself.”

One participant also stated that the course has “taught me about my limitations but also how I can learn more about mind and body when together,” suggesting that this participant was more aware of their mind and body holistically and interaction between their thought and behaviour. Another commented that they have “learnt a positive new process for challenging emotions... learning how to turn things away.” This would suggest that



the course has some psychological benefits, which will be examined in the full evaluation, after the second wave of courses.

Finally, participants stated that they valued the opportunity to learn their own practice, and this had taught them how to continue yoga independently, following the course. It is hoped that the CD of mindfulness tracks will support the participants further and assist them in maintaining their practice, experiencing the benefits that come with this.

7.5 A SENSE OF SELF 'I FEEL BETTER, I FEEL MORE FOCUSED ON MYSELF AND MY WELLBEING'

With the participants accounts of their feelings towards themselves, some expressed non-judgemental feelings, as highlighted by the following participant examples; "I'm OK with who I am...", "normal," and "okay." Whilst other participants expressed less positive feelings toward themselves, with one describing these feelings as 'stuck' and another individual commenting that "I feel guilt and regret." At the mid-point evaluations there emerged a different narrative from the participants in relation to feelings of themselves, with one participant stating that they felt "a lot better than I use to, I've learnt to forgive and love myself" and another that "I'm at peace within." This would suggest feelings of self-compassion and understanding were emergent.

Finally, at the end of the Course, all participants expressed feelings of self-achievement and purpose, highlighted by one participant stating that they felt "very well, proud of myself" and another as "good, I've changed for the better and come a long way." Subsequently, the post evaluation suggested that there was continued improvement in participants' positive feelings towards themselves. This is further demonstrated by one participant who reflected that "I feel better, I feel more focused on myself and my wellbeing." Taken together, the data indicates an association with the programme and inclinations to enhance the participants' sense of self.

'I feel better, I feel more focused on myself and my wellbeing'

7.6 FEELINGS TOWARDS OTHERS

The graph in Figure 5 highlights that there was an increase in average scores between the pre-evaluation stage and mid-point evaluation, with a slight decrease in scores at the post-evaluation stage, when participants were asked to rate the extent to which they are mindful of other people's feelings. Most participants stated they were 'more aware of their actions and how these impact others'. When examining the data, most participants stated a higher score at the post-evaluation stage, though one respondent stated a lower score, which brought down the average score. This participant was not present at the start of the programme and so it is noted that this has skewed the data somewhat.

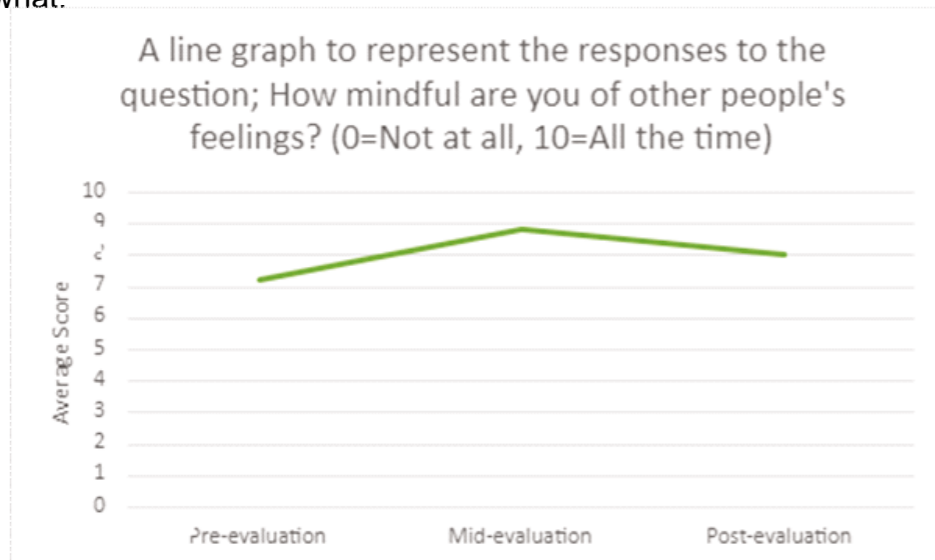


Figure 5: A line graph to represent the average responses to the question; How mindful are you of other people's feelings?

7.6 CLOSURE AND LOSS "...IT HURTS, BUT I CAN'T CHANGE IT AND REFUSE TO LET IT RUIN THE PRESENT AND FUTURE I AM OK WITH IT."

The data suggests that many of the participants demonstrated feelings of disappointment and loss regarding their past, with most highlighting 'regret,' exemplified by one participant stating that "I have many regrets," and another expressing they had experienced "missed opportunities." At the mid-point evaluation participants were seeking to move forward and find closure, exemplified by a

respondent highlighting that "I am ok with it, and am determined to use my past experience to help others," and another stating that "[I] use my experience to help others," and another participant expressing that "...it hurts, but I can't change it and refuse to let it ruin the present and future, I am ok with it." The evidence suggests that there is a sense of reflection, 'meaning making' and closure emerging. Finally, the post evaluation data indicated a sense of closure, typified by one participant commenting that "it's history, so focus on the future."

8.0 IMPROVEMENTS

Very few improvements were suggested by the participants, both during the course and at the post-evaluation stage. Participants stated that they wanted the course to be longer and to have additional time and space to refine their own practice. Some commented on the environment of the space where the course took place and suggested that having a radio in the room (due to staff involvement) was distracting.

9.0 CONCLUSION

Overall, the data highlights several positive outcomes for the residents involved in the MBY course, with focus on personal benefits and progressive outcomes when considering others in the prison environment. The improvement in management of thoughts has encouraged participants to be more mindful of their feelings and reactions towards negative situations. Being able to control one's thoughts has allowed residents to consider their reactions, when faced with challenging situations. There was a vast improvement in the mental wellbeing of participants, especially around anxiety and anxious feelings. A reduction in these feelings allows residents to feel more in control and at ease with their emotions, providing them with a sense of peace, enabling them to feel more relaxed and experience reduced levels of stress. As well as improving mental wellbeing, many residents also felt there were many physical improvements. Participants stated they experienced less physical pain and improvements with their health, which overall made them feel more comfortable daily. Having developed healthier techniques to release negative thoughts, residents stated that it helped them to curb violent outbursts, self-harm, aggression towards staff and contribute to improved behaviour on the wings; overall reducing harm and creating a safer environment.



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