

Despite successfully completing treatment many clients can be left with an overwhelming feeling of 'what now'?

David Gilliver hears about a new programme designed to get them through this tricky time and firmly on the right path

New horizons

The New Year will start with an innovative new approach to aftercare for Rugby House clients in west London. The organisation is joining forces with independent therapist and trainer Catherine Dixon to pilot the eight-week *Empower your life* programme at its Alcohol Resource Centre in Ladbroke Grove.

The programme combines elements of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), positive psychology, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), hypnotherapy and the energy principles of holistic therapies like acupuncture and Chi Kung (also known as Qigong). 'It's cherry picked the best,' she says. 'And all of these are very positive and life affirming. It's about hope and inspiration, and something exciting that clients can do for themselves. Motivation comes from within and for that they need powerful goals.'

The eclectic mix of ingredients mirrors her background – starting in shiatsu and acupuncture, she went on to train in cognitive hypnotherapy. 'When I talk about the mind body link it comes from 11 years training and practice, combining the bits that I think belong together,' she says.

An alternative to maintenance based treatment, *Empower your life* is aimed at clients who have attained stability and are looking at the next step, based on the premise that relapse tends to come from low self-esteem and unresolved emotional issues, as well as a sense of futility from an inability to see a different kind of future.

The programme works to challenge clients' beliefs about their own capabilities by fostering self-esteem, personal responsibility and building strengths. It also addresses the lack of guidance and supervision after treatment that can also make relapse more likely. 'It's about breaking free of "this is how life is, and it has to be like this",' she says.

Dixon has been working with Rugby House on aftercare for around three years, and the programme is the result of extensive

client feedback – her hope now is that *Empower your life* becomes incorporated into mainstream aftercare practice in the sector. 'The first thing when working with clients who've gone through treatment is to maintain, obviously, but my work is focused on taking stock and looking at the future – the what next, rather than the why. That doesn't mean I ignore the why, but it's not what I'm concentrating on.'

Crucially – and unusually for this kind of work – the programme will be measured and assessed by the NTA, with clients filling in Treatment Outcomes Profile (TOP) forms at the beginning, middle and end. It has been created with the input of alcohol clients throughout its development but is equally applicable to any addiction, and comes from years of listening to what clients find helpful. 'It's based on what I know makes a change in my private practice – what I know people will pay for,' she says.

The work is in a group context which, as well as being more economical, also means clients can share ideas and be spurred on by their peers. 'It focuses on evaluating where you are and who you think you are from the point of view of strengths, attributes and skills, and also what drains those strengths. The act of doing this in a group – acknowledging and verbalising those ideas – can be very useful,' she says.

It is also careful not to impose pre-existing fixed concepts of recovery, revolving instead around continuous healthy lifestyle choices. So how does it work? 'It's looking at the whole concept of the mind body connection, what actually happens,' she says. 'That's something that's bandied around but what does it actually mean? How much does the mind lead in the struggle for health? It's all very well going through a detox programme, stopping drinking and starting to eat again, but it's the correlation between mind and body that is explained in this programme.'

Part of this is based on the concept of 'magnetic thinking', a



hybrid of aspects of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) among others, as well as drawing heavily on her work with phobias and smoking. 'It's about what actually happens to the mind, the way we talk to ourselves,' she says. 'The idea is that the mind is like a magnet – we magnetise our thoughts. By obsessing, for example, on having a drink you create the situation – the thought becomes reality. The mind is creating the idea – 'I want something' – then it's 'how do I get it' and then it ends up in an action. It's about awareness of how powerful your thoughts are, and taking control and responsibility. It's a challenging programme.'

It also provides clients with exercises to break those cycles, before going on to focus on the creation of goals and their manifestation. 'Clients make very specific goals in any area they choose – and remember they're doing this in a group so they're accountable – looking to the future and how it will be different. The mind needs a future focus to lead it – the unconscious will play out anything you want it to, so it's about re-programming that. Clients learn a suite of tools where they use visualisation and see their goals.'

According to the programme, there are set steps to achieving any goal, addiction-related or not. 'Understanding what you want is the first thing,' she says. 'Most of the people I deal with tell me what they don't want, so the first thing is to identify exactly what it is they do want and not to be apologetic about it. That's a process in itself – when you identify what you want, you step out of victimhood. It's the first step of empowerment.'

The second is for clients to believe they can have it, she says, looking at 'limiting beliefs'. 'I have a range of tools to slice through those – the language of "I can't", "that's not for me". It's standing up for yourself and stepping out of the "poor me, I can't do anything" mentality, and you absolutely have to step out of that if you're going to get through addiction. The third is feeling you can have it, the fourth is taking inspired action, getting on with it, while the fifth is an acceptance that it's going to take time.'

Does she feel some clients could be too self-conscious to fully open up to these concepts in a group setting? 'I think that depends on the group itself, but there is an assessment process before to explain what it's about and encourage them to have an open mind – that's critical. A group of people that's highly motivated has its own energy – eight people in a room all wanting to improve their lives and helping each other. The therapist doesn't have all the answers.'

Dixon will facilitate the groups to begin with, and is also interested in establishing a buddying scheme to progress beyond the eight weeks. The aim is that there will be monthly follow-up sessions to provide a level of supervision as well as evaluate impact, and clients will also get a resource pack covering everything from healthy eating to meditation. 'When people start to see themselves in a much more positive light they start to want to do things for themselves, and then it's about getting them the right information. It's certainly not about following certain steps – there's no philosophy here,' she says.

The strategies at the core of *Empower your life* have also proved very popular with women, largely, she believes, because of the focus on self-esteem. 'Alcohol can completely obliterate self-esteem and sense of self in a woman. This is getting them to look at themselves in a completely different way.'

Coming from outside of the field has given her an ideal vantage point on what's missing and what would make a

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difference, she believes. 'It's about imagination and doing things differently, especially in the current climate. Group therapy is nothing new but I wouldn't call this therapy, it's group coaching. It's a structure and a process but not imposing things.'

The eight-week duration is designed to keep energy and inspiration levels high, with the ideal group size anywhere between eight and 12. Several can be run at once to help build up an evidence base for its effectiveness and, of course, group work is more economical. 'A one-to-one therapy session is not only a great cost but it's also slow and I'm not sure it's always the right way of going about things. This is a much softer approach – it's not keying in on individual problems.'

Future plans are for an online community for the programme, to keep the momentum going and provide a place for people share stories and experiences. 'Communities are where people share goals and get a lot of support – you start to create something that has momentum and it's a great way of keeping people on track,' she says.

The programme is also designed as a transferable package that others can use. 'They don't even have to be therapists, she says. 'They just have to be good with people, be a good facilitator – it's transportable. And it will also be developed constantly as it runs, based on user feedback – it's definitely not something static.'

So does she think NTA accreditation will help break down some of the suspicion that can greet anything seen as different? 'It's not different, really,' she says. 'It's bringing together the best of what's out there at the moment – what people are paying independent therapists for. All the clients I've spoken to want to do to it – there's user involvement every step of the way. The feedback is that it's something new and fresh, and I think that's what the NTA is looking at. Given the amount of money spent on treatment, there's a need for other solutions.'