

FEATURES


Mind how you go



HEALTH: Living Mindfully director Gary Heads. Picture: DAVID WOOD

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SOMETHING really remarkable has been happening in County Durham in the last six years. Since 2009 growing numbers of patients who have complained to their family doctor about feeling over stressed have been referred to a little-known organisation called Living Mindfully.

Based in [Consett](#) Business Park but offering its services at venues all over the region, the organisation provides fully trained ‘mindfulness’ therapists who teach stressed adults a mixture of techniques, including meditation, which is intended to reduce stress and equip people with ways to manage the stresses and strains of everyday life.

The origins of mindfulness owes something to ancient Buddhist philosophy but is increasingly being taught as a non-religious, practical tool to help people cope. According to the Mental Health Foundation, which endorses mindfulness, more than 100 studies have now shown changes in brain waves activity during medication, with increased activity in the area of the brain association with positive emotion.

Initially funded by the now defunct County Durham Primary Care Trust the scheme has proved so successful that it has been rolled out to neighbouring Darlington.













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Now funded out of the public health budgets of Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council it has been taken up by more than 2,500 adults. More recently Living Mindfully has been commissioned by Durham County Council to take mindfulness into every secondary school in the county.

All of this is no surprise to Gary Heads, the softly-spoken director of Living Mindfully CIC, which is orchestrating the mindfulness revolution in County Durham. “It has been hugely popular with patients and very successful in its results,” says Gary, who became convinced of the value of mindfulness when he used this approach to help long term unemployed people get back to work, after being commissioned by Job Centre Plus. We recently had a research paper published based on an evaluation of our work in County Durham over a four year period. It shows a significant improvement in people’s anxiety, stress, depression and even chronic pain.”

An encouraging thing is that people are sustaining their improvements by practising the mindfulness techniques they have learned.

“Mindfulness is a life skill which you can practice on an ongoing basis, ideally on a daily basis,” he adds.

The scale of what is happening in County Durham came home to Gary after he gave evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Committee on Mindfulness in Westminster recently.“I would say the scale of commissioning in County Durham is very unusual. I wouldn’t be surprised if we led the way in mindfulness although I can’t be 100 per cent sure.”

While Gary has had a long-standing interest in Tibet and has read books by Tibetan spiritual leader, The Dalai Lama, he stresses that mindfulness has no religious context. “I have always had an interest in meditation and mindfulness is a lot to do with meditation, particularly in relation to helping people see habitual patterns of thought but there is no religious content whatsoever in mindfulness. It is a technique that can be taught.”

Gary says he has been aware of the benefits of regular meditation for decades and says we now we have 40 years of research to back that up. He points to the way that mindfulness has taken off across the Atlantic as further evidence of its value.

“In the United States, mindfulness is huge. In business you have organisations like Google who now have in-house mindfulness teachers and staff who have been practising mindfulness for quite a few years now.”

With a background in coaching and a masters degree in mindfulness from Bangor University, Gary set up Living Mindfully as a social enterprise in 2009. “There was a lot of interest in the work I was doing for Job Centre Plus and then we got the contract from the NHS,” says Gary.

With just two members of staff at the beginning Living Mindfully now has eight teachers, including five associate teachers. When GPs refer a potential client, who is typically suffering from anxiety, or depression or , very commonly, workplace stress, they are sent an application form to fill in. The teacher leading the course will go through the form, contact the client and explain exactly what they will be expected to do, so there are no surprises.

Taught in different venues around County Durham and Darlington, mindfulness is typically delivered to a dozen people at a time in five weekly sessions, each lasting two-and-a-half hours. Sessions will teach meditation techniques, gentle stretching and mindful movement, group dialogue and discussions designed to promote greater mindfulness in everyday life. Clients will also be issued with a manual and CDs so they can continue the good work at home.

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Gary is excited about the next steps – moving into County Durham secondary schools. “It is a different programme, specifically designed for children. The aim is to train the teachers to train the children so it is embedded in each school. If you learn this in school it is a skill for life.”