



Evaluation of

Universal Comedy™

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Comedy Taster® Workshops
Developmental Comedy Courses®
Public Forum Showcase Events

Support and Promote
Recovery
for
People with
Mental ill-health

A project in partnership with Glasgow City LRA's

Mental Health Foundation

The Mental Health Foundation (MHF) is the leading UK research and development charity working in mental health, learning disabilities and dementia. The Foundation is unique in bringing teams that undertake research, develop services, design training, influence policy, and raise public awareness within one organisation.

The MHF works across the UK and Europe, with a wide variety of partners including the voluntary sector, businesses, local authorities, health boards, national bodies and networks. This breadth means that we are ideally placed to bring a vision of the 'bigger picture' of wellbeing to inform everything we do.

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Introduction

Universal Comedy is a charity and emerging social enterprise established in 2004 by people experiencing ill health. The aim of Universal Comedy is to engage and support people with ill health, recovering ill health, mental health problems and employment challenges by providing practical opportunities in the process and art-form of comedy. In 2008, Universal Comedy received funding to work in partnership with Glasgow based mental health services to provide tailored comedy taster workshops and developmental courses with the aim of addressing health and social inequalities, and to promote and support recovery through regular structured activity. Universal Comedy commissioned the Scottish Development Centre for Mental Health (SDC) to independently evaluate these workshops and courses, called Comedy Clinics. In February 2011 SDC merged to become part of the Mental Health Foundation (MHF) and continued with the evaluation¹.

MHF has evaluated the impact the Taster Comedy Clinics, the Developmental Ten Week Comedy Course and the Participant-led Public Forum Showcase Event had on participants' mental health and wellbeing, in particular exploring the ways in which attendance of the courses impacted on their employability, recovery, and condition management. The evaluation took place between January 2010 and May 2011 and was designed and reported with a view to providing good practice guidance to assist the setting up of similar initiatives in the future.

¹ Referred to from now on as MHF

The intended mental health and wellbeing outcomes for participants in the course included:

- Lasting friendships and support;
- Reduced isolation;
- Higher aspirations;
- Improved confidence and self esteem;
- Regained identity;
- Encouragement into learning and employment;
- Providing structure and purpose;
- Improved condition management;
- Challenging mental health stigma and discrimination through the Showcase events².

Methodology

To evaluate the impact the Taster Comedy Clinics®, the Developmental Comedy Courses and the Showcase Events had on participants the following activities were undertaken.

Participant Surveys

Three surveys were distributed to participants across the project to address the aims and objectives of the project. The surveys mainly consisted of closed questions, and did not exceed four sides of A4 in length so not to dissuade people from completing it. Universal Comedy printed, distributed and collected completed surveys. The first survey was intended to be distributed to participants at the Taster Comedy Clinics that were run by Universal Comedy to provide potential participants with an insight

into what the Comedy Clinic Workshops would involve. However, this did not happen. The second and third surveys were distributed to all participants who chose to take part in the full Comedy Clinics 10 week course. Participants received a pre-course survey to complete on the first day of the Comedy Clinics course and then received a post-course survey at the end of the course. At the close of the evaluation period, Universal Comedy posted all completed surveys to MHF who inputted the feedback into a data entry form, and analysed the findings.

Participant focus groups

In addition to the three surveys, MHF conducted two focus groups with Comedy Course participants (one focus group for each of the Comedy Course cohorts) to fully assess the impact of the courses. These focus groups took place at the end of the courses once the Showcase Event had been completed. The focus groups were facilitated by a member of the MHF research team. Universal Comedy set the date and time for the focus groups, and invited participants to attend. A cash incentive was given to participants by Universal Comedy. Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants and lasted around an hour and a half. The focus groups were analysed thematically and quotes have been used in the report to illustrate key findings.

Partner interview

Finally, MHF interviewed a member of staff at Glasgow East Regeneration Agency (GERA) who was involved in referring clients to one of the Comedy Courses and attended one of the 10 week courses to support participants.

² Including self stigma as well as stigma from others.

Response

The aim of the project was to engage approximately 20 participants in two 10 week Comedy Courses (approximately ten participants per course). Over the period of time that the Comedy Clinics took place, attendance varied from week to week but approximately 13 people took part in the first cohort and six took part in the second cohort, meaning the 10 week Comedy Courses engaged with 19 participants overall. This evaluation is based on the respondents who took part in the pre and post-course surveys and/or the focus groups. None of the Taster Comedy Clinic surveys were distributed and so analysis is limited to those who attended the Comedy Clinic 10 week course. In the first cohort all 13 participants completed the pre-course survey and 10 completed the post-course survey. In the second cohort all six participants completed the pre-course survey and five completed the post-course survey. Therefore, this report is based on a total of 19 pre-course responses and 15 post-course responses, as well as 14 focus group participants. This shows a high response rate.

Summary of findings - Impact

Participant feedback via pre and post-course surveys and two focus groups have demonstrated that Universal Comedy has been successful in achieving intended mental health and wellbeing outcomes for participants in the 10 week Comedy Course and Showcase Event. The mental health and wellbeing of participants was improved in a range of ways.

Summary of attitude statements

Summary table of attitude statements		
Attitude statements	% Agree	
	Pre ³	Post ⁴
I enjoyed the Comedy Course	95	100
Overall, I was satisfied with the Comedy Course	95	100
I feel happier after going to the Comedy Course	84	100
I learned new skills at the Comedy Course	74	100
I feel more confident after going to the Comedy Course	73	100
I would recommend the Comedy Course to my friends or family	79	87
I made new friends at the Comedy Course	58	86
I am looking forward to taking part in a performance at the end of the Comedy Course	69	85
I would like to attend more comedy sessions like the Comedy Course	84	80

³ 19 responses

⁴ 15 responses

Improved mood

100% of participants at the end of the Comedy Course (compared to 84% at the beginning) said that they felt happier after going to it.

“I can honestly say that I feel a million times better. I laugh a bit more, I smile a bit more.”

Many of the comments made during the evaluation illustrated that the positive impacts the Comedy Course had on mood were sustained beyond the course workshops thus showing the courses potential to have long lasting impacts on participants.

“I see the funny side of life now. I can laugh at myself, whereas before I didn't think anything was funny at all. I just feel happier inside.”

Building friendships and peer support with other participants

86% of participants at the end of the Comedy Course (compared to 58% at the beginning) said that they had made new friends at the Comedy Course. Attending the course has also helped people gain confidence in developing relationships and enhanced their social skills, both within and outwith the workshops.

“Helps me have more confidence to make friends.”

The friendships created between participants were important in providing participants with peer support.

“We all support each other, and we’re always here for each other.”

“We’re all in the same boat, and we can all help one another and support one another.”

Increased motivation and reduced isolation

Building new friendships and social supports motivated some participants to stay engaged in the project, which helped reduce their isolation.

“I never wanted to go outside and this has got me out of the house, to meet people. I enjoy the company.”

For some participants attending the Comedy Course increased their motivation as getting up and coming to the course was in itself an outcome.

“Easterhouse is like the other side of the city for us...Just to motivate yourself in that way and go every week was an achievement to me I think.”

Reduced isolation and building social supports are thus additional project objectives that were successfully achieved by the Comedy Course.

Improved mental health and condition management

The Comedy Course helped provide some participants with a structure and purpose to their day.

“It's given me something to look forward to.”

“It has given me purpose to my day.”

This has in turn motivated participants to attend the Comedy Course and allowed them to gain positive mental health outcomes from attending.

“I think it's really lifted the depression, and my husband particularly saw big differences in me...it's something that's bringing me back.”

“It's the old saying...laughter's the best medicine.”

As a result, some participants have become better at managing their condition and not letting it get in the way of doing things that make them feel better.

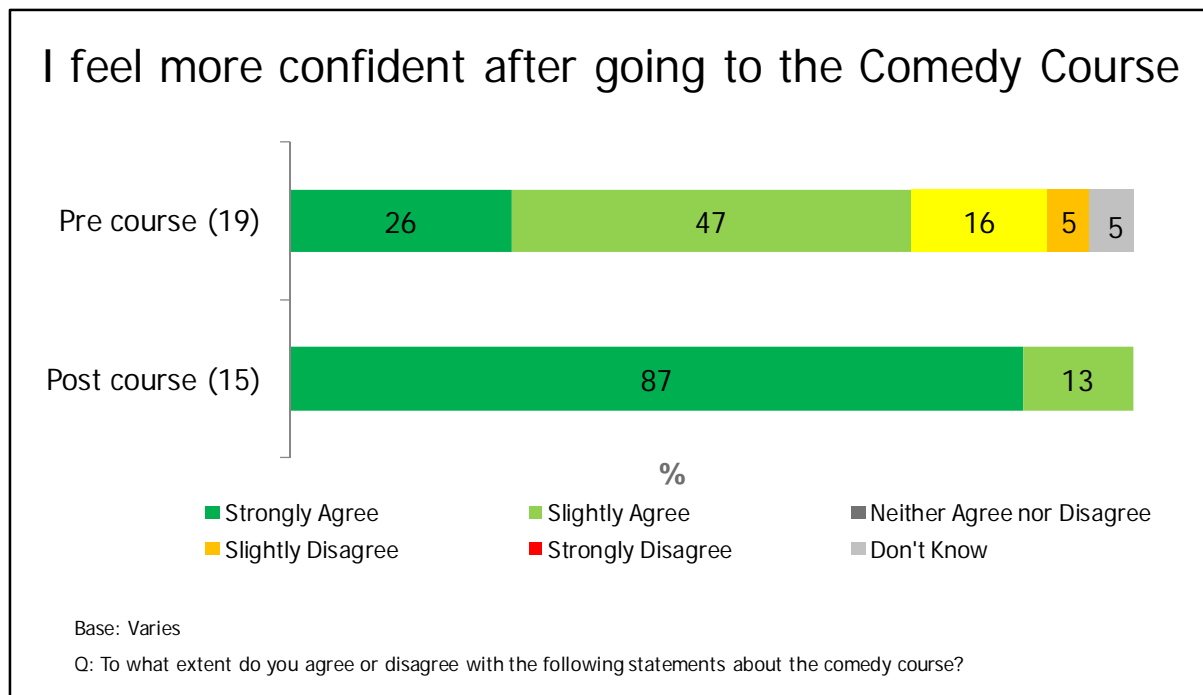
“I just wanted to sit back and let them entertain me, but with me having the motivation and having to put some work into it, I get more out of it. I get more reward, I've got happier and my depression has kind of left me.”

“I came along supported by Carr-gomm at the beginning but all other weeks I came myself which was a big step. It made me feel fine again and express myself.”

Increased confidence and self esteem

100% of participants at the end of the Comedy Course (compared to 73% at the beginning) said that they felt more confident after going to the Comedy Course.

“I feel more confident within myself.”



The confidence participants gained throughout the course meant they had overcome their fear of putting on a showcase and were able to go through with it.

“I actually said when they said that we would be doing a show at the end of it, I says, ‘No way will I be doing anything.’ But it came about, so it just shows you, you don’t know what’s round the corner.”

Higher life aspirations

Being able to stand up in front of an audience at the Showcase increased participants' confidence further by helping them achieve something they had not thought possible.

“I spoke about Universal Comedy [to a support worker]. I said I can't believe I went up on stage, six months ago you probably wouldn't have got me out my front door...I would recommend it to anybody.”

Regained sense of self and identity

Attending the Comedy Course and the Showcase also helped participants feel like “themselves” again, feeling as if they had regained their sense of identity.

“I managed to get my personality back.”

“This workshop here has given me a lot of confidence to feel okay in my own skin. Doing this course has really helped me come out of my shell and I think it has helped other aspects of my life.”

Challenging mental health stigma and discrimination through the Showcase events

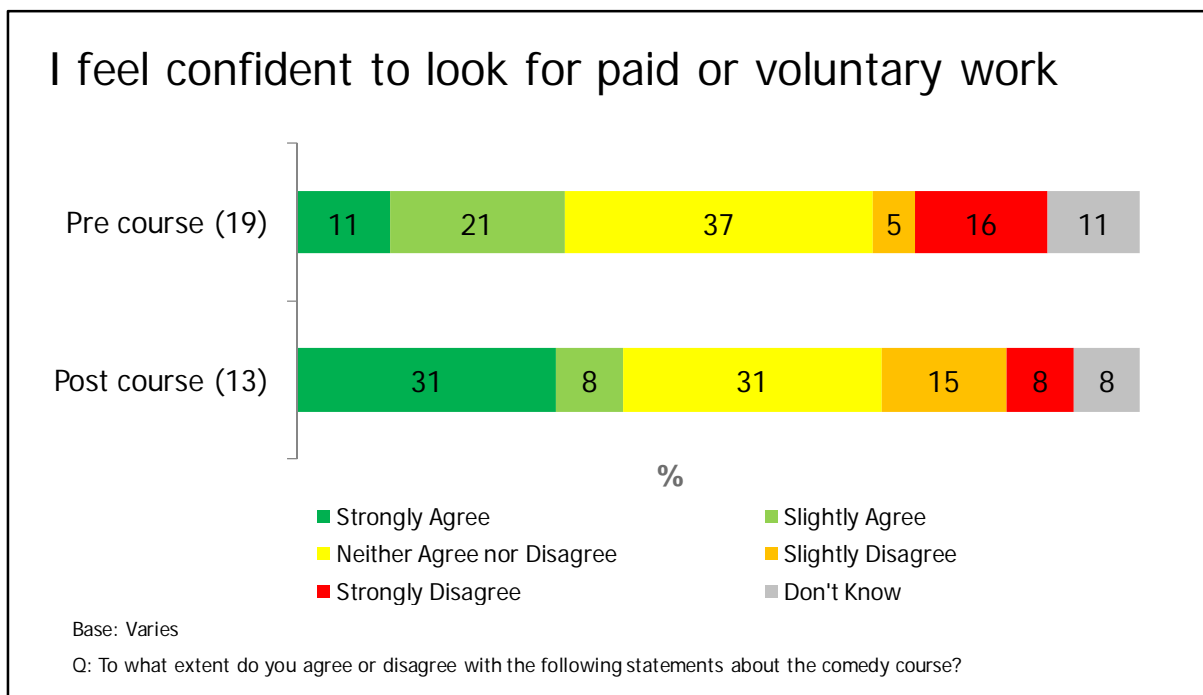
Many respondents felt that participating in the Showcase helped challenge stigma and discrimination of mental health as it helped people see them differently, which reduced stigmatising views of mental health problems.

“I think when you tell people what you’re doing it does take the, I won’t say it takes the stigma away, but it certainly removes it a wee bit.”

“We do feel that people look at us in a different light now we’ve done the comedy thing. Because I think they think, ‘Oh these are people that suffer from mental health issues, and they can do it,’ and obviously it encourages other people with mental health problems to give it a bash.”

Encouragement into learning and employment

Many respondents were uncertain whether attending the Comedy Course had improved their employment prospects and only 39% of participants at the end of the course (compared to 32% at the beginning) agreed with the statement “I feel confident to look for paid or voluntary work”.

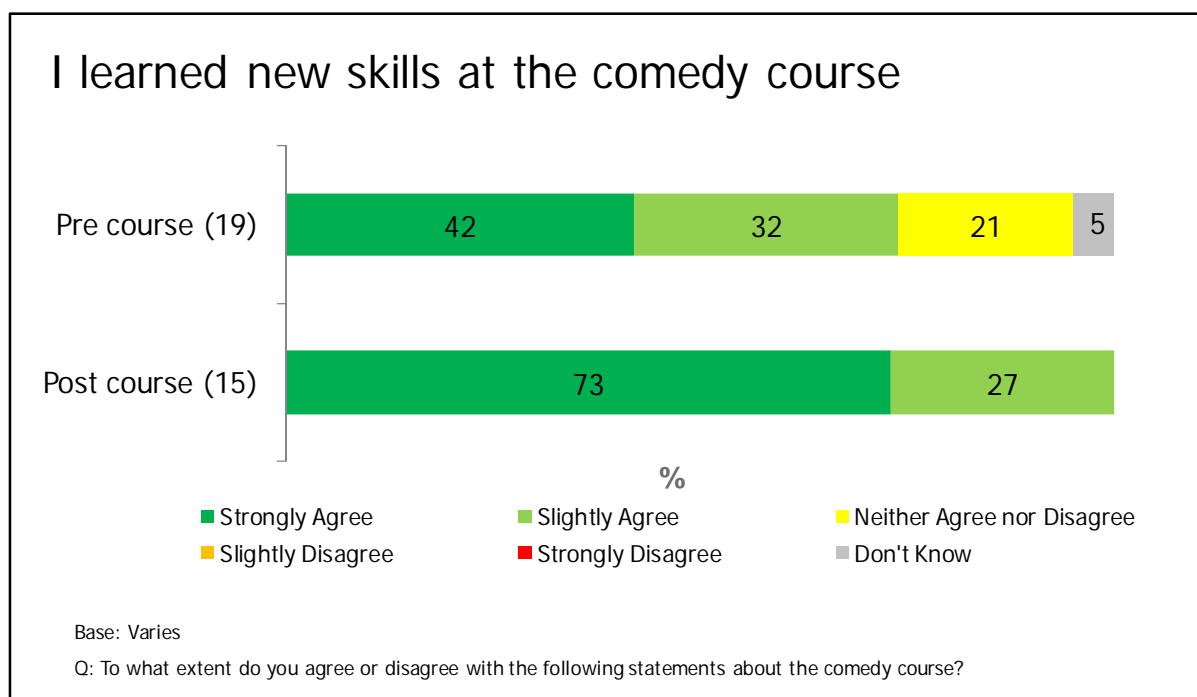


However, some participants recognised that the confidence and skills they learnt as a result of attending the project had improved their employment prospects and gave the following responses to the question *“How was coming to the Comedy Course improved your employment prospects?”*.

“More confidence to get qualifications.”

“I have a much better chance of expressing myself.”

“It’s helped me with my shyness, and my presentation.”



One respondent explicitly mentioned that attending the Comedy Course had helped them find employment.

“I have now got a new part-time job and am delighted.”

Furthermore, some of the people who dropped out of the course did so because they had got a job and could no longer attend the course, which was therefore not captured in the post-course survey.

The benefits people gained from participating in the Comedy Course helped them access other opportunities to enhance their lives.

“I find it’s opened up new opportunities for me.”

“For me it has given me the opportunity when other workshops have come up I’ve said yes to them.”

What worked well and key learning

By talking about their experience of participating in the project, participants were able to identify those factors that have helped the project work well, as well as identify a number of challenges that have arisen during the process.

An important contributing factor for the success of the projects was the comedians who delivered the course. Participants felt they were non-judgemental, encouraging, and approachable. Of particular benefit to participants was the continual positive feedback that they provide to help participants get the most out of the workshops and which helped them to stay engaged.

“I found that any time you thought there was something difficult, they were there to help you through it.”

Staff were also skilled in ensuring that they supported participants to help themselves. They passed on new skills and encouraged participants to develop their own skills.

“I didn’t realise that we would be doing the work and cheering ourselves up. I didn’t realise we had to put that effort in. I am glad that we did, really glad.”

All of the above assisted many participants in developing the skills and confidence they needed to take part in the Showcase Event at the end of the course which further boosted their confidence and self belief.

In addition, of particular note was the success of Universal Comedy in engaging its target audience. By ensuring that the course was easily accessible, free, at an appropriate time, open to all abilities and experience and delivered in a supportive way, it was able to address social and health inequalities and successfully engaged people experiencing mild to moderate and severe and enduring mental health problems.

Other features that helped the projects to be successful included:

- Using a range of methods to promote and raise awareness about the project to try and reach the target group and gain the buy-in of referrers;
- Gaining the buy-in of referrers who acted as local champions to encourage referrals and support participants to stay engaged;

- Offering taster workshops so participants could come and try the course before committing to it;
- Delivering a high quality varied and adaptable course which motivated and engaged participants;
- Offering a variety of activities to encourage continued engagement and inclusion;
- Creating a fun and safe atmosphere;
- Providing free access to the project;
- Being based in a venue that was easily accessible by public transport;
- Making the course accessible in terms of the time it was run and the accessibility of the venue;
- Ending with a Showcase which gave participants something to work towards.

For participants the key challenge associated with participating in the projects was having the confidence to take that first step of engaging, or feeling intimidated by the activities involved. Participants reflected that they were helped to overcome these issues by staff and peers. However, without feedback from those who dropped out or who didn't engage to start with, it would be difficult to know if further challenges exist.

Overall, participants recognised what they have got out of being part of the projects and saw value in the project continuing, both for themselves and others.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the good practice identified through the evaluation findings, a range of recommendations for other organisations who want to develop similar projects are set out below.

These recommendations are of particular relevance to those setting up and running successful projects which aim to engage with people with mental health problems to support their recovery, build their capacity to self manage, and promote their social inclusion. However, these recommendations are also relevant for anyone who wants to engage with isolated groups and deliver a project which promotes mental health improvement and build confidence, self-esteem and higher aspirations amongst participants.

Some recommendations for a successful project are:

- Use a variety of methods to advertise and engage participants to effectively reach the target group and help maximise engagement;
- Where possible, have a referral partner organisation(s) who can help with recruitment and maintaining engagement;
- Running taster workshops can help potential participants see what is involved before committing to a course and can help encouraging attendance;
- Use prior knowledge or conduct research to identify potential barriers to access and from this decide on appropriate days, times and running time for target groups and where the activities should be based;
- Where possible, a venue should be local or easily accessible by public transport;

- Identify and develop ways to break down barriers to engagement for participants (e.g. offering project for free, accessible by public transport, at appropriate times of day);
- Employ appropriate staff that can effectively engage, empower and motivate participants in a supportive and non-judgmental manner;
- Maintain a flexible approach to working, ready to adapt plan if necessary and allowing participants to engage in a way they feel comfortable;
- Deliver a programme of activities that can be accessed by people of varying abilities to promote social inclusion;
- Put in place an exit strategy/pathway for participants once the project finishes;
- Consider building in an opportunity for family and friends to see work to help reduce stigma and discrimination;
- Build in evaluation to evidence the successful delivery of outcome.

The Universal Comedy Clinics have been very successful in meeting its aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of participants by supporting their recovery, condition management and building skills to enhance learning and employment opportunities. Therefore, recommendations for commissioners are to:

- Acknowledge the mental health benefits of the Comedy Clinics in aiding recovery and condition management, promoting mental health improvement more generally and developing skills to enhance employment opportunities.
- As a result, Comedy Clinics should be widely accessible to people experiencing mental health problems and people experiencing poor mental health or low self confidence.

- The success of the Comedy Clinics adds to the growing evidence based that supports participating in the arts as beneficial in promoting good mental health and wellbeing which is valued by participants. Therefore, future mental health strategies should reflect the value that service users place on participating in the arts such as the Comedy Clinics in supporting their recovery and the additional benefits they receive by engaging with participatory arts programmes.
- Participatory arts programmes have been highlighted by service users as something valuable that could be funded through Self Directed Support funds to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, good quality arts programmes like the Comedy Clinics should be made available to those who need it by providing sustainable funding.