



Boxing clever?

An unusual mental health and well-being project in east London is using boxing to help young people get them sorted

In a warehouse in the middle of a mess of motorways and railway lines near Canning Town in the London borough of Newham, a surprising young people's mental health and wellbeing project is happening. Part of the young people's mental health and wellbeing project Right Here Newham, the project is using weekly boxing sessions as a way to help vulnerable young black and minority ethnic (BME) people to look after their wellbeing.

Young people come from across the borough to receive one-to-one boxing coaching and emotional and mental health support and advice in sessions run by former ABA national boxing champion Tony Cesay, a respected figure both in the local community and the wider boxing world.

The boxing sessions don't look like a traditional youth mental health project, but that isn't the intention. They're a way of reaching young people aged 16 to 18 who may be having a challenging life and may be experiencing mental health difficulties. "Coming here has taken me out of the gang life," says one attendee. "Before I felt like I had no future, but through doing this and talking to Tony I've stopped smoking and have just been kept busy."

Cesay's work was first funded by Right Here Newham in 2011 as part of a range of activities commissioned by young people themselves. Says Elise Leclerc, Communications and Involvement Manager of Right Here, "When you say 'boxing as medicine' for better mental health usually people think 'surely boxing is supposed to be so bad for your brain?' and hitting people is not usually considered to be a good thing for your mental health."

How did the project come about?

Right Here Newham's Boxing Project, says Elise Leclerc "is seen first as something that young people have chosen that they're interested in... and this is a service that really has been designed by young people. It's probably not a service that statutory mental health services would be considering."

What happens in the project?

Each week young people come to the gym to work on a boxing and training programme with Cesay and volunteers, themselves young people who have benefited from being involved with the discipline and the fellowship offered by the training situation. After an initial few weeks of very structured training, the young people can train independently and draw upon Cesay and their peers for support. Cesay works hard to make the sessions a safe space where young people know what to expect and what is expected of them. Says one attendee; “Everyone knows each other, we're very equal. Some people just come to hang out. A lot is about trust, it's like a family.”

Using the traditional boxing values of rigour and physical achievement allows Cesay and his volunteers to get to know young people who otherwise might 'fall through the cracks'. Says Cesay: “You filter out what they need – they like the pads (pieces of boxing equipment held by a trainer to allow boxers to punch at moving objects and receive feedback) so I let them, even though it wrecks my back. You talk to them whilst you do the fitness stuff. People come in here to get shouted at as they don't get it at home. If they're not doing the exercises I shout at them.”

While the activity doesn't feel like a traditional mental health or wellbeing project, the young people that come, and keep coming, have numerous challenges that they face in their lives. Says Elise Leclerc: “Young people there [are] very visibly vulnerable; with alcohol abuse issues and drug abuse; young people with anger management or self confidence issues; a couple of young people who are very depressed.” Many find it difficult to connect with the demands of the boxing when they first attend: “They said that themselves when I spoke to them, they actually have really, really changed through their attendance of the boxing sessions. One of the young people I spoke to was saying how boxing helped him focus; helped him feel more confident and just get away from all the issues in his head and have a personal goal.”

Cesay and his volunteers are committed to mental health and wellbeing but know better than to foreground it in a situation where stigma may put young people off attending. The project deliberately doesn't mention mental health or wellbeing in its promotional materials. Says one volunteer: “We try to make them aware of mental health but do it informally and one-to-one. It's not done in a structured way.”

It's an approach that has been termed 'mental health by stealth' or youth work with a mental health twist: “[Tony Cesay] is able to help young people around their mental health issues in a holistic way, combining physical and mental health, and to have these conversations... His role is very important because he's also got an aura in the community. He's a well respected figure so young people come to him and build trust with him.”

The trainer/mentor relationship is vital to the project. Says Leclerc of a session she attended; “The session was six to nine. This young man came in at about half past eight totally drunk and still wanting to train. Tony spoke to him and said 'You've been drinking

again' and 'go and put your gear on'. It was quite amazing to see this young man still travelled despite his own issues, still got into his gear and tried some training. Tony stayed with him to help him despite the fact the session was over.”

It's a sign of the power of this relationship that young people involved have gone on to train their peers and to volunteer to help the project grow. Says one attendee: “Tony's got back our whole life. I teach my younger brother too. When my mates see my fitness is ahead of everyone else at school they ask 'How come you're so fit?' and I tell them about the gym. In that way we become role models.” Peer work will form a greater part of the project in future.

Lessons from the project

While the project is helping young people who have attended to become peer trainers to other young people, the unique nature of the relationships involved poses interesting questions for scalability and replication. The Newham Boxing project is the right project in the right place - according to one member of Right Here Newham staff "what they are doing is being more effective than anything else Right Here Newham does." - but would it work somewhere else run by different people?

It's clear that the young people attending the boxing sessions value Cesay and his approach and that the project succeeds because it brings mental health and wellbeing into a space where its target group feels comfortable. It's also clear that the project draws value for using an existing community opportunity as a means to carry mental health and wellbeing support to young people who may not access other forms of intervention. Says Elise Leclerc: “Right Here Newham, because it's been given free reign to recruit sessional staff in a way that works for their community, they've been able to do that. I don't know if that would be the case in every community - that you need a figurehead or community respected person to run some sessions - but that's definitely what's been happening in Newham.”

For Elise Leclerc, the local nature of the project represents part of the value of the programme as a whole. Supporting young people to come up with specific solutions to the challenges they and others like them face, does create unique local outcomes: “The Right Here Newham Youth panel commissioned Cesay and his volunteers. It's not the first thing that the Panel commissioned, and it made a few mistakes along the way, but the Panel has learnt from its mistakes, in true actions research fashion!

What Right Here is showing is that if you want to help young people to be healthier and not reach crisis point and use statutory services; here's an approach that's working really well. We're saving the taxpayer money.”