

Public health case study

Ben McGannan

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Neuroscience and music meet in an innovative new approach to mental health: “change of mind”

The fifth annual Wellbeing Symposium, at Canterbury Christchurch University’s Augustine Hall on 22 February, saw the launch of “Change of Mind” to an audience of 300 people from the private, public and third sectors. “Change of Mind” is a new initiative that taps the power of music to elicit empathy and thereby encourage a more supportive workplace environment for sufferers from mental health problems.

The “Change of Mind” project resulted from collaboration between Wellbeing People, founders of the Symposium, and Science in Music (SiM), whose goal is to use the power of music to popularise science-based knowledge. SiM previously developed a CD and movie called “The Neuro Files” – a musical journey through numerous brain regions – that showcases some of the many functions performed by the brain. Its sequel, “Change of Mind”, is a CD of 20 songs concerning mental health problems resulting from brain-system malfunctions.

Wellbeing People had the idea of using eight of the songs concerning more frequently encountered conditions – e.g. depression, anxiety, anorexia – as the basis for a new tool to help deal with problems encountered in the workplace. The fruit of that thinking, its new “Change of Mind” workshop series, consists of up to eight modules, each focussing on a single mental health condition.

Every module is catalysed by one song from the “Change of Mind” CD that evokes what it feels like to suffer from the particular condition under discussion. Course moderators help attendees of the workshops to recognise the feelings of sufferers by exploring both the emotional import of the music and the semantic content of the lyrics. They go on to explain why the condition arises, how it might be recognised, and what colleagues can do to help in the workplace. The key goal is to improve workplace resilience by improving team support for sufferers on the basis of empathy.

The course has a distinctly neuroscientific orientation. Its technical content was largely drawn from the CD notes on each condition, which were vetted for accuracy by a distinguished professor of psychiatry. Whilst not denying the role of life experiences in triggering symptoms, the course emphasises that many mental health problems have roots in genetic predispositions, structural damage, disrupted brain systems, and biochemical deficits or imbalances. Consequently, they are often medical diagnoses, and not the consequence of personal shortcomings.

The “Change of Mind” concept was presented to the Wellbeing Symposium by Charlotte Wiseman, a trained course moderator. She described her experience, during 14 years in the fashion industry, of seeing people bullied and excluded on account of eating disorders, or constructively dismissed for suffering from depression. Her passion for delivering “Change of Mind” was, she said, in part driven by such experiences.

To demonstrate the musical stimulus, Wiseman played the packed audience an emotionally charged piece called “Give Me Peace”, evoking the experience of suffering from depression. She described how, in trials, most listeners had been emotionally affected by the music, and some extremely moved. The minority who were more resistant to empathising were nevertheless able to benefit by engaging with the content cerebrally.

Wiseman emphasised that the aims of the course were to use heightened empathy as a springboard for sharing knowledge about the nature of the featured mental health conditions, and to encourage greater support from colleagues for sufferers. She likened a workplace team to

a pocket-sprung mattress: if one area is not sustaining downward pressure as well as normally, those around it need to compensate, this “adapt-and-support” ethic being the essence of workplace resilience.

Science in Music founder John Bunyard, who attended the event, commented, “Change of Mind was born of a desire to help compensate for lamentable underfunding of mental-illness prevention, research and treatment. We’re delighted that an organisation as energetic and enterprising as Wellbeing People is taking it forward on a broad front”.

Wellbeing People managing director Ben McGannan said, “Change of Mind is the latest addition to our growing portfolio of health & wellbeing tools that exploit genuine innovation in film, music, drama and literature. We’re proud to be associated with it”.

The Wellbeing Symposium is an event that draws a wide, varied audience of professionals with a shared interest in developing best practice around prevention, health, and wellbeing for the individual, business or community, and features an equally broad spectrum of speakers. This year, in his keynote presentation “Mind the Gap”, Christian Van Stolk, Vice President of Rand Europe, built on the Symposium’s ongoing concern for mental health issues by exposing the impact on the modern workplace of lost productivity caused by staff and wellbeing problems, notably in mental health.

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