

Arts Day: A creative intervention for NHS staff wellbeing

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Abstract

Healthcare staff wellbeing is linked to patient outcomes. Arts programmes have been shown to improve physical and emotional wellbeing in hospital staff. Starting in 2016 NELFT has delivered an annual one day creative arts festival known as Arts Day. Attendees self-rated their wellbeing on arrival, as they left and as part of a longer term follow up survey. There was an increase in the average self-rated wellbeing score after each Arts Day. The long term follow-up surveys show that attendees felt valued and enjoyed meeting up with colleagues. There is limited evidence of the long term impact of Arts Day. Less than 5% of NELFT staff have been released to attend the events. Future success will depend on integration with the wider wellbeing agenda and modifications to reach more staff.

Introduction

Workforce health and wellbeing is an issue across the National Health Service (NHS). Staff health has an impact on the quality and safety of patient care. As in other health care systems, within the NHS, the task of caring for sick people is exacerbated by internal and

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external demands for efficiencies and cost savings and creates stress (Morgan, 2016). Stress is believed to account for over 30 per cent of sickness absence in the NHS, costing £300-400 million per year (NHS Employers, 2019).

Stressful working environments can cause or exacerbate issues of staff burnout, staff turnover and medical error (Morgan, 2016). NHS organisations which value staff health and wellbeing have better outcomes, higher levels of patient satisfaction, better staff retention and lower sickness absence (Boorman, 2009).

There is a growing body of research demonstrating the positive impact that participatory arts and cultural activities can have on health and wellbeing (Ings et al., 2012). Within clinical settings, there is evidence of the effectiveness of arts interventions in reducing stress, anxiety and depression in areas including cancer care, pain management and surgery (Staricoff, 2004).

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPGAHW) (2017) report *Creative Health* described the ways in which the arts enhance the experience of work from giving people the confidence to enter into employment to returning to work after illness and coping with work related conditions including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Arts programmes have also been shown to improve physical and emotional wellbeing in hospital staff (Morgan, 2016). Interventions are often delivered at the workplace as short creative breaks taken during the working day, or outside of regular working hours (for example, Karpavičiūtė & Macijauskienė, 2016).

Another class of staff wellbeing intervention is the “retreat”, an extended break taken at an attractive venue located at distance from the workplace and often aimed at nursing staff. Retreats often focus on self-care and may offer a holistic programme incorporating healthy

eating, mindfulness, yoga, and activities focused on reflection and resilience building (for example Altounji et al., 2012) rather than creative arts activities.

This article describes a one day creative arts festival developed as a wellbeing intervention for mental health and community health staff of North East London NHS Foundation Trust (NELFT). Now in its third year, Arts Day aims to provide staff with the opportunity to take an extended break away from the workplace to try hands-on creative activities so that they can have fun, improve wellbeing and connect with each other.

Methodology

In 2016 NELFT's Medical Education Committee agreed to fund a pilot creative arts intervention for staff. A steering group was convened and led by the Medical Education Department with support from the Trust's Library and Knowledge Service and Practice Improvement Teams. Arts Day was a considerable undertaking. The planning took place over several months prior to the event.

From the outset the group were clear that although Arts Day was very obviously about trying to help reduce staff stress levels, the word "stress" would not be mentioned in connection with the event. We identified two aims for the inaugural event: to enable staff to have fun and to connect with each other.

The event was named Arts Day to reflect the wellbeing link with the then annual Trust Sports Day. From the outset the group's main objective was to make sure that colleagues had fun. Arts Day was scheduled to take place in January 2017 with the hope that it would act as an antidote to the often cold and miserable post-festive season.

CEME conference centre in Rainham was selected as a venue as it offers a large circulation area adjoined by several classrooms and containing a 100 seater lecture theatre pod.

Medical Education Events Team and the Library Team worked to source leaders to run activities. We used a mixture of existing contacts, known Trust staff talent and sourced “big name” / “high profile” activities from new suppliers. We matched activities to the different spaces available. This set up allowed attendees to choose from a range of bookable 1.5-2 hour workshops taking place in the classrooms at set times, drop-in activities taking place all day in the circulation area and “arena” events taking place in the circulation area. Activities offered at Arts Day 2017 are summarised in Table 1.

Drop-in	Workshops	Arena
Painting	Creative writing	African drumming
Origami	Sewing	(performance and
Adult colouring	Make-up	workshop)
Cake decorating	Candle decorating	Bollywood dancing
Head wrapping	Acting	(performance and
Balloon modelling	Folk singing	workshop)

Table 1: summary of activities offered at Arts Day 2017

The Trust’s Communications Team were engaged to help to publicise the event. They designed an eye catching flyer and promoted the event across all of their channels. The event also featured in the Library Newsletter. Attendance at Arts Day was free.

On arrival attendees were asked to self-rate their wellbeing on a scale of 0 to 100. They were asked the same question as they left along with two additional questions. Longer term

follow-up surveys were sent out two months after each festival. Questions asked as part of each survey are summarised in table 2.

Entry	Exit	Long term follow-up
<p>On a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is "very bad" and 100 is "very good", how are you feeling?</p>	<p>Whilst you were at Arts Day did you connect with colleagues?</p> <p>Whilst you were at Arts Day did you have fun?</p> <p>On a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is "very bad" and 100 is "very good", how are you feeling?</p>	<p>Have you participated in any creative activities since you attended NELFT's first ever Arts Day in February 2017?</p> <p>If yes, please specify which activities you have participated in?</p> <p>On a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is "very bad" and 100 is "very good", how are you feeling?</p> <p>Is there anything you would like to tell us about the impact of Arts Day and/or your participation in creative activities?</p>

Table 2: questions put to attendees on entry, exit and long term follow up

At the first Arts Day in 2017 those who attended the bookable workshops were asked for qualitative feedback. The inaugural Arts Day achieved its two aims: 100% of attendees said that they had had fun and 97% had also connected with colleagues at the event. Good qualitative feedback was received on the day and in the long term follow up survey. Several workshop leaders expressed their enthusiasm for the event and willingness to participate again in future. The steering group agreed that the event was a success. Arts Day had been challenging to plan

and deliver but the format had worked well. Following discussion with the Medical Education Committee it was decided to run the event again in 2018 and then 2019. The booking, scheduling and content were similar for each of the three years. There were some changes to the drop-in and workshop activities informed by attendee feedback or necessitated by availability. The evaluation questions and processes were distributed each year. Figures 1-4 capture some of the atmosphere of Arts Day 2017.



Figure 1: origami at Arts Day 2017



Figure 2: cake decorating at Arts Day 2017



Figure 3: painting at Arts Day 2017



Figure 4: sewing at Arts Day 2017

Results

Attendance

Due to the “drop-in” style of Arts Day it was difficult to ensure that all attendees were sampled on entering and exiting the event. The number of attendees responding to the entry and exit questions at each Arts Day are summarised in Table 3.

	Entry	Exit
Arts Day 2017	66	67
Arts Day 2018	196	169
Arts Day 2019	166	156

Table 3: number of attendees responding to the entry and exit surveys at each Arts Day

On the day evaluation – quantitative results

For each of the three Arts Days there was an increase in the average self-rated wellbeing score after the event as shown in Figure 1.

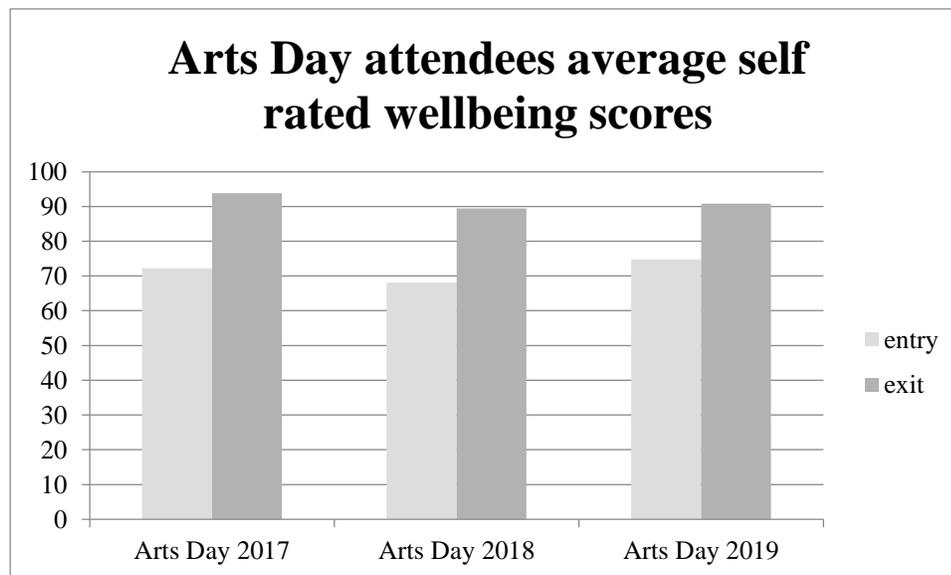


Figure 1: Arts Day attendees’ average self-rated wellbeing scores

Table 4 shows that at all three Arts Days the overwhelming majority of respondents reported that they connected with colleagues. At all three Arts Days all respondents said they had had fun.

	% of respondents who connected with colleagues at Arts Day	% of respondents who had fun at Arts Day
Arts Day 2017	97%	100%
Arts Day 2018	94.7%	100%
Arts Day 2019	95.5%	100%

Table 4: Summary of responses to survey questions about connecting with colleagues and having fun

On the day evaluation – qualitative feedback

We sought qualitative feedback from those who attended the bookable workshops at Arts Day 2017. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Indicative comments include:

- Very relaxing, therapeutic. Enjoyed session. A hobby to practice. Great tutor. Thank you. (candle making)
- Really enjoyed it. I have found a new hobby. (candle making)
- Had a fantastic time. I can sew!! (sewing)
- Wonderful teachers, patient, kind. Really enjoyed it. What an achievement. Really really heartfelt thank you. (sewing)
- Very good. Beautiful effects. Learned some new tips. Thank you. (make up)

- Really enjoyable and constructive. Wish it was a longer session. Thank you. (creative writing)
- Now know some good ideas to start my writing (creative writing)

Long term follow up

Between 34 and 53% of attendees responded to the long term follow up survey for each arts day. Between 43 and 62% of attendees participated in creative activities since Arts Day. Results are summarised in Table 5.

	number of respondents	% of total number of “entry” respondents who replied to the long term follow up survey	% of respondents who had participated in any creative activities SINCE attending Arts Day
Arts Day 2017	35	53.0%	62.9%
Arts Day 2018	57	29.1%	43.9%
Arts Day 2019	57	34.3%	43.9%

Table 5: Arts Day attendees’ responses to long term follow up

Figure 2 shows that there was very little difference between average self-rated wellbeing on entry and long term follow up.

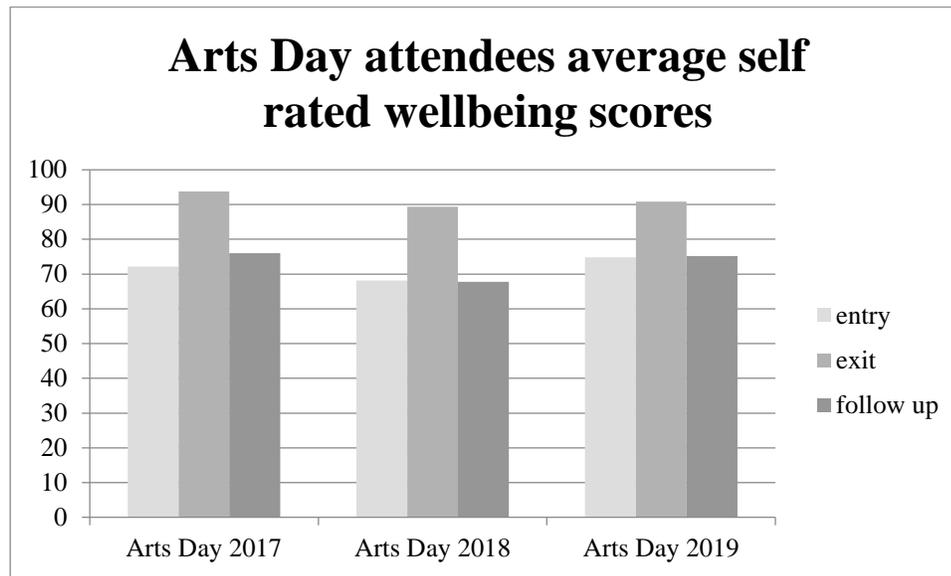


Figure 2: Arts Day attendees average self-rated wellbeing scores with long term follow up scores.

Responses to the open ended question “Is there anything you would like to tell us about the impact of Arts Day and / or your participation in creative activities?” were analysed to identify themes which included:

- General expressions of enjoyment and having fun
- Connecting with colleagues away from the work setting
- Positive aspect of time away from work setting – relaxation and distraction
- Feeling appreciated and valued by the Trust
- Appreciation of the opportunity to try new things
- Gaining confidence to try new activities

Some impactful quotations from respondents include:

2017

- I think it was a great day and it gave me the sense of being valued and appreciated
- It was a day of a breath of fresh air. I was able to reflect and find old interests and found I still had hidden talents in being creative. I returned to work with a completely different feeling and felt more energised and happy
- It was great fun and so refreshing to have an event where the arts were promoted and encouraged. Being creative has a huge impact on wellbeing and I hope there are more Arts Days in the future

2018

- I think I see it as more accessible now i.e. I can learn things
- I have begun earring making since this event and it has become a hobby of mine
- ... I feel that a one off arts day is not going to conclude feeling better for the rest of the year. Maybe looking at longer lunch break may help people, without it affecting their salary so we have the opportunity to eat lunch, have a walk something like that. Maybe offering free yoga, mindfulness, meditation would help. Just suggestions on how to support staff

2019

- I really enjoy it, a good place to network. One of NELFT's best events!

- It has opened my mind to new possibilities to introduce on the Ward...Also I booked going to my local library once a month to learn how to make different cards which I enjoy very much...it does emphasise the difference it can make to patients and Staff on the Ward and also for me individually to have some time to relax and to try and be creative.

Discussion

This research used some very simplistic and subjective methods to try to obtain quantitative measures of the impact of the intervention. We asked attendees how they were feeling and used this single numerical figure as a proxy for the more complex and multifaceted concept of “wellbeing”. There was no attempt to investigate more sophisticated tools such as the Reeder stress scale and others as used by, for example Karpavičiūtė and Macijauskienė (2016).

While collecting the data it was apparent that some attendees gave themselves high scores on entry as they were either excited in anticipation or simply relieved to have arrived having spent time struggling to find parking at the venue. We calculated an average score for all attendees. If we had linked the entry and exit scores to individuals this could have facilitated more robust statistical analysis. There was no attempt to look at other objective measures, for example attendees’ sickness absence in the months following the event. Despite these shortcomings, the methodology was highly consistent across all three Arts Days, enabling comparison.

The inaugural Arts Day achieved its core on the day objectives: attendees had fun and connected with colleagues. This success was repeated in the next two events. Arts Day has been very well received by attendees and became an engaging and positive story for the Trust (Aldam

et al, 2017). However, it is a large and complex event to deliver, even for an experienced Events Team. Arts Day required considerable staff time, across several teams, to plan and deliver as well as a (limited) budget. It is difficult to take an objective view on whether it is cost effective.

There is limited evidence for the long term impact of Arts Day on attendees' wellbeing. We received reasonable responses to the long term follow up survey, with over 50% of attendees responding in 2017. There was very little difference between average self-rated wellbeing scores on entry and long term follow up. Those who responded to the long term follow up survey might be those who gained the most positive impact from the day and were therefore most motivated to participate. The event clearly had a long term impact on some attendees. Several reported that they now had a new hobby or had signed up for lessons.

NELFT has over 6000 staff based at over 200 sites across four London Boroughs, Essex and Kent. Despite advance scheduling and intensive internal marketing due to distances involved and the nature of their work and staffing levels, less than 5% of staff have been able to be released to attend one or more Arts Days. Arts Day 2019's lower attendance figures are thought to be due to a change of date during the planning process and giving staff less notice of the event compared with the previous years.

The Trust's geography makes it unrealistic to expect large proportions of staff would be able to participate in events such as Arts Day. For our more remote sites it might be more appropriate to "meet them where they are" (Morgan, 2016) with smaller scale activities delivered locally. NELFT is an agile organisation, many staff have laptops and web conferencing software is readily available. In future we could explore using technology to increase accessibility perhaps live streaming arena performances or offering workshops as webinars. A single venue festival

such as this might be more suited to large hospitals where all staff are in one place, although this would counteract the benefits associated with being away from the work setting.

It was interesting that several attendees reported that they would take ideas back to the work place to share with their patients. Wilson et al. (2016) noted that the majority of health care professionals believe that engaging in arts interventions has a positive impact on patients' health and wellbeing. That some attendees intended to ensure their patients also benefited from Arts Day underscores the belief that some health professionals often neglect their own self-care by putting first the needs of others (Jones, 2017).

Since Arts Day began in 2017 there has been a growing focus on staff wellbeing at NELFT. There is now a network of Wellbeing Ambassadors promoting a wide ranging programme of resources and activities delivered throughout the trust including crochet, knitting, massage, chair yoga, exercise classes, mindfulness workshops and other benefits. These developments have happened in parallel to Arts Day. It is difficult to ascertain if Arts Day helped to stimulate any of the creative groups that now take place at various sites across the organisation. Future Arts Days should be integrated into the wider wellbeing programme and promoted through the Wellbeing Ambassadors. Better integration will allow Arts Day to contribute to a larger programme whose effectiveness is evidenced through more robust measures including the annual NHS staff survey.

Conclusion

Arts Day is a fun event. More rigorous longer term follow-up is needed to demonstrate any long term effect on wellbeing and staff stress levels. Future success will depend on better

integration with the wider wellbeing agenda as well as modifications and additions to allow it to reach more staff across the organisation.

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