

Insights Report

Age & Dementia Friendly Gymnastics Programme

Evaluation Findings

For more detail please see the Age & Dementia Friendly Gymnastics Programme Evaluation Report, or contact British Gymnastics Foundation, at info@britishgymnasticsfoundation.org

The British Gymnastics Foundation has developed a gymnastics chair-based exercise programme that has been piloted in two residential care homes and one day centre. The pilots began in November 2015 and ran for eight months until the end of June 2016.

The Programme was based on an exercise programme developed by the Korean and Japanese Gymnastics Federations for people living with dementia. The British Gymnastics Foundation has taken the core principles of this programme and adapted it for British culture, in terms of relevance to music, social participation and adherence to structured activity for the current generation of older people in Britain.

The programme has been specifically designed to be interactive with lots of humour and contact through partner activities, cognitively stimulating and memory arousing with the type of music used and the use of asymmetric activities, and to help improve core strength and the full use of the upper body including shoulder movements, arm movements and hand and finger movements. The programme has also evolved to incorporate the use of the feet, and the lower legs for those with greater physical ability.

The programme is novel to Britain and is different to its namesake of chair-based exercise. The focus of the programme is one of integrating the physical, cognitive and social elements

to achieve a single goal for people with dementia, with each activity being assigned a specific music that is both action based and also memory evoking.

The programme has shown to have a demonstrable benefit in the physical, emotional and cognitive aspects of older people. Those older people having mild to advanced forms of dementia appear to benefit the most. The opportunity to socialise has been a successful aspect of the programme. The learning from the programme has evidenced a number of factors that can help improve the effectiveness and experience of the programme for older people.

"I thought the programme would at best, just be able to slow down the rate of dementia progressing, but I am actually finding that some participants appear to be regaining functions which were thought to be lost." (Session Deliverer)

For many of the older people participating, their external environment changed little and one can therefore be confident that much of the improvement observed will have been because of this programme. This is one aspect that will however benefit from being tested further, alongside developing an understanding of why the programme is leading to the changes being observed.

The scaling up of this programme beyond the pilot phase will require the development of materials, including programme content and associated music, to train individuals to be able to deliver the programme. It will also require thoughtful consideration of the types of individuals required to effectively deliver the programme. The cost of these activities and that of people delivering these sessions is likely to need to come from external grants, as residential care homes and day centres are unlikely to be able to or willing to contribute to the costs, with the alternatives being developing a voluntary led delivery model.

Person delivering the session will need to be confident and a performer and someone who is engaging and enthusiastic and is able to be both patient and silly; and someone who has or can absorb medical and anatomical knowledge and information on how to engage with people with differing levels of cognitive ability.

The programme continued in the two residential care homes after the end of the pilot phase, and a feedback form designed by the British Gymnastics Foundation, and completed by staff at one of the residential care homes showed that the care home staff assessed 10 out of the 14 older people (71%) to have achieved an improvement in some physical movement, 13 out of the 14 older people (93%) to be happier and more settled, 14 out of the 14 older people (100%) to be easier to connect with and 12 out of 14 older people (86%) to be socialising with other residents and staff better. This is consistent with the findings of the pilot phase of the programme and will benefit from being tested further to understand to what extent these improvements are due to the programme, and how representative these fourteen residents are of all participants in the programme.