

MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING IMPROVES WELL-BEING AND EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOR HOMELESS YOUTH



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- My Strengths Training for Life™ (MST4Life™) is a programme developed by researchers at the University of Birmingham with St Basils, a homeless charity based in the West Midlands.
- This is the first sport psychology intervention to be delivered in a housing service to homeless young people with multiple barriers to independence, and has led to significant improvements in their resilience, self-worth and well-being.
- Participating in MST4Life™ increased the likelihood by 30 percentage points, over and above psychologically informed wrap-around support, that young people would exit homelessness engaged in education, employment or training.
- We are looking to roll out this programme beyond the West Midlands and are actively looking for partners who could help us realise this aim.

Introduction

Homelessness is a major social issue in the UK, costing the Government over £1 billion/year and resulting in the large-scale deterioration of mental and physical health, sustained social isolation, and low life expectancy. Young people aged 16-24 are disproportionately affected, particularly in Birmingham where youth homelessness was five times the national average in 2013-2014. These problems will persist and escalate into adulthood unless we support homeless young people to overcome their multiple and complex barriers to being healthier and economically independent.

My Strengths Training for Life™ (MST4Life™)

Mental skills training is an approach used to help elite athletes maximise their performance by focusing on their psychological strengths. It

was adapted by academics from the University of Birmingham in collaboration with staff and young people from St Basils into the MST4Life™ programme.

MST4Life™ helps homeless young people to recognize, develop and apply mental techniques, such as goal-setting, planning, support seeking, reframing, and group work, to improve their self-confidence, interpersonal skills, resilience, and well-being. These mental skills are just as important and applicable for success and personal well-being in everyday life as they are in sport.

St Basils operates as a Psychologically Informed Environment which supports the learning and impacts of the MST4Life™ programme.

“I can get up in the morning and look for jobs or go out and get a job. I don’t have to wake up and put myself down. In a way this programme has motivated me to do a lot of things. If I didn’t come to this programme I’d still be in bed sleeping really, doing nothing, or just watching TV.”

Underlying principles

Rather than trying to fix problems or issues, the focus of the programme is more on nurturing talent as well as helping participants to realise their potential by focusing on their strengths. In doing so, MST4Life™ supports independent living skills for homeless young people. By creating opportunities to identify adaptive coping strategies by applying their strengths, for example, the programme fosters personal responsibility, problem solving skills and self-regulation. These assets support young people as they navigate through their day-to-day lives and help them to



remain resilient even when faced with difficulty.

Programme structure

MST4Life™ involves 10 sessions, capped by a trip to the University of Birmingham's Raymond Priestley Centre in the Lake District, where young people have the opportunity to try out their mental skills in a variety of outdoor activities such as mountain walking and high ropes courses.

The programme is delivered in a psychologically-informed style, and demands a hands-on approach from participants, so young people learn to recognise and further evolve their mental strengths in progressive personal and group challenges. By helping them to discover and use their mental strengths, MST4Life™ creates empowering and affirming experiences with long-term benefits.

"MST has been an experience that I simply cannot compare to anything else. Only in hindsight, as the sessions panned out, it became apparent the strong link between a healthy state of mind and the activities we were involved in. And it truly has helped me to make sense of different aspects of my life, helping me with things such as organization, timekeeping, communication and social skills. Perhaps most importantly, MST has given me the self-assurance I would do okay on my own; it has reaffirmed my faith in this world around me."

Impact

In five years, MST4Life™ has reached over 600 homeless young people living in supported accommodation. This is the first sport psychology intervention to be delivered in a housing service to homeless young people with multiple barriers to independence, and has led to significant improvements in their resilience, self-worth and well-being. Young people also report being more physically active and, in some cases, reducing substance abuse, self-harming, and suicidal ideation.



"It [MST] was really inspirational for me. I could go to sleep every night and just think it's been a good day, I've got to get along with people, open up more, share stories, listen to what they've got to say. It's just made me appreciate life more, from other people's views and not to judge people as much and what they went through. I've just learned to help people through whatever struggles they're going through because you're still human, it's better to just work together and help, so I learned to do that ...I felt good and it felt a big achievement for everything that I found challenging, so I just feel really lifted, like my spirit, I feel better."

An independent cost benefit analysis¹ found that participating in MST4Life™ increased the likelihood by 30 percentage points, over and above psychologically informed wrap-around support, that young people would exit homelessness engaged in education, employment or training.

Find out more

MST4Life™ and associated research
www.sprintproject.org

St Basils
www.stbasils.org.uk

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1 This cost benefit analysis was conducted by the Birmingham Business School in 2019, using programme data between the periods of October 2014 to September 2017.