# Audio file

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# Transcript

**Sam Watling**

Hello and welcome. My name is Sam Watling. I'm here with Gary Shepherd. We're here to talk about a research project that's currently taking place on a charity called Menfulness, of which I am a trustee. So I'm very excited to be here.I have my own podcast. You've left it to me to introduce.

Yeah. Now how about if I pass it over to you guys to tell us a bit about the project?

**Gary Shepherd**

OK. Thanks, Sam. Yeah. I thought about.

Introducing the podcast and then, as you say, some you've got enormous amount of experience in podcasting and I'm not very good at this type of thing, so I thought it would be really good that you open up and you can ask questions and think you're much more, professional with things than I am.

I'm Gary Shepherd. I work in the counselling department and we were lucky enough last month to get a communities research grant for about £10,000, which enabled us to employ research assistant Holly.

And our research revolves around a charity, A York based charity called Menfulness, Men's Mental health charity that we're passionate about.

And Sam's from Menfulness. And so this might be a good opportunity. It's time for you to tell us a little bit about the Menfulness charity.

**Sam Watling**

Thank you, Gary. Yeah. So we've been a charity since May of last year, but we've existed since about 2019 and it what it started as a dad's group with activities where dads could come bring their kids. And what we were finding is that dads were sharing about the struggles, the struggles of parenthood.

Also, the struggles of life generally and some of them were asking about whether they could bring friends along that weren't parents. And as, as I understand it, Menfulness was born from that. I didn't come on board until 2020, sort of in the midst of the pandemic. And for me, it started off as I needed it. I was personally going through.

Struggles of becoming a parent of the idea of becoming a parent, you know, filled me full of anxiety that I wasn't expecting.

And it had some CBT and that really helped me with the anxiety. But what it didn't do is helped me communicate it to my friends and kind of feel OK about it around other people. So it still felt like this secret that I held and so I looked for a network locally and as I say, thankfully Menfulness was there.

And it started off in the WhatsApp group and of course during COVID people needed that type of support online virtual.

Support where people were talking about how are you keeping well during this time? What are you doing to keep your mindset right? And it was things, you know, normal things like exercise, reading, sort of staying off social media that the just the sort of stuff that you would imagine but what we were.

Blokes were getting tips from each other.

And so I was, I sort of said to some of the trustees, look, I think we've got something here. I think we could produce something with all these tips on that's also got all of our contact details on and the ‘Menfulness Manual’ was born. Hell of a pun. So the manual was born, and we produced this, leaflet, they said, well, look, if we can give you some money for it, can you go away?

And make this happen and get it produced.

And so I did and then that was the first of many things that I wanted to do and before, you know, I became a trustee. And I think that's the reason I tell that story is because it's. That's how we seem to operate is that people come in needing the support that we've got. And then when they've had that support and they're in a better place they want.

To give back and our job as trustees is to sort of try and facilitate that and it's grown from the odd walk and talk and from the football game and into regular talking circle sessions.

And we'll maybe talk about it in a bit then affordable and funded counselling, which is what most of our donations is spent on. So a lot of this has been around, you know, not really knowing how it's working, but knowing that it's working. And so you know, we were delighted when you came along with all your experience and knowledge and sort of said well.

We're quite interested in what's going on here and we were like us too, you know, can we do something? So I wonder, throw it back to you and ask, you know, what was it about Menfulness? How did you come across as and what's the project's going to be about?

**Gary Shepherd**

Yeah, that's a great. That's a great question. The where things started with me, I run a summer school, every June until about August every year. My second year students, do a research project. It's just a like a desk research project. And we looked at the question why don't men come into mental health? Why don't the.

Men come into counselling and psychotherapy. What is it about, guys? We did a scoping review and the scoping review really suggested.

The men really like to go inside and sort their own problems out, and they've got quite an attitude of, well, they're quite stoic and they think that if they can't sort out, there's this stigma around not being able to sort their own mental health. There's also.

It's something about men believe that counselling and therapy is somehow a women's pursuit and it's not really for men to sit around and talk to one another. And so there's a lot of stigma even though when men go to counselling or therapy, the outcomes are exactly the same. So it's very, very successful. If you can get a guy through the door.

So our scoping review. It really set wheels in motion really for me I started thinking. Well, there's something here about if only we can facilitate and help to get men into counselling and therapy. I wonder what's out there.

Then I came across Jack, who's one of the trustees, one of the founders of Menfulness, and had a had a meeting with Jack that was about a two hour meeting that York St. John, where Jack told me all about Menfulness, and I really got hooked because I could tell that they were doing so much good in.

The York and surrounding area and I was really keen to get involved just as you were saying about people in mindfulness that join. And then they really want to get involved.

And I was very keen to try to think about how I could help as a researcher to come on board and do something in terms of being helpful to Menfulness knowing what I knew about research.

So I decided that I wanted to maybe look at something around. Well, my research question was how does Menfulness help? What does it do? What other things it does? Jack spent a lot of time talking to me about the WhatsApp group, about Facebook group and about offline groups as well football and five aside football and retro great games night and talk groups. So it's like there's a black box here and things are working. But what's inside the black box?

So that got me intrigued. and then the Institute of Social Justice sent around an e-mail.

Asking for expressions of interest, and from that I thought to myself, this would be quite a quite an interesting one and myself and you and Jack and we put together a proposal and then the rest of this history. So we became successful in October we recruited Holly who's a postgraduate student. She's actually a postgraduate counselling student now, and Holly's been working for us on the research project for a day and a half. And she's been doing some fantastic work.

**Sam Watling**

Yeah, yeah. Which is, which is incredible. You know, for us and I think, you know, I can speak for all the trustees when we were all a bit gobsmacked because that's really technically the first time anybody has worked for Menfulness because we're all volunteers and all we're all sort of juggling lots of other things. And so really getting to grips with.

What's happening behind the scenes is something that we just haven't had the capacity to do, so we're absolutely over the moon and very grateful to the Institute of Social Justice and to you for your initial interest. And I think what you just said there is exactly right, is that we can what we feel like we're doing is.

Making space for men at whatever level they're at so that they're comfortable to engage with us. So some men might just be thinking about their fitness and they want a.

Friendly game of football, the normal game of football. You're going to get crunching tackles and people talking at you when you miss the ball and all that sort of stuff that that some looks just don't want to deal with and.

You know, things are hard enough without feeling like you're not good enough at football. I'm terrible at it and but I enjoy it, you know? And so I want to do it and I want to get. I want to enjoy the fitness side of it as.

But once you're in there and you get that positive engagement from a group of men.

Then you start listening to what we're talking about and then you start engaging in the conversations and then you realise all of those connections. Yeah, all of our experiences are very unique, but there is a real similarity in the depths that we'll let ourselves get to before we'll ask for help. And so the idea being is get people let people know we exist.

Make an opportunity for everyone to engage with and then normalise saying I'm not alright and maybe I could use some counselling and maybe you know, maybe it's just the peer-to-peer support. Maybe it's just the exercise. You know, but whatever it is, can we find a way to get men talking before they get to crisis point? You know, we're not trying to.

Crisis support for people we will sign post people if that's what they need. But what we're finding is.

Some people just need to talk to someone you know and just to feel like they're normal and what they're going through is all.

Right, so this is really exciting for us because I think what we we'll hopefully be able to do is decide as a charity.

What we do next, like where we might go because at the moment we could just keep creating more and more activities and but it would be used for us to know which ones are really working and what are men really saying about them and what is it about them that gets people in and perhaps those are the places that we should be growing and pushing.

And maybe that's the future. That's why we've called. We've called it Menfulness 2.0. I mean it's it's, you know, we thought it would be nice to sort of.

Give it some bells and whistles and you know so that we can get men to try and engage with it and fill in the questionnaires and and get involved in the focus groups. But in reality, what it really is for us is what's happening. Why is it happening and what we're gonna do about.

**Gary Shepherd**

Yeah, yeah. Fantastic. So that that nicely sort of brings us on to the type of activities that we've been doing and that we're engaged in, in terms of the research.

So it's been really interesting because our bid ~~is~~ a co-produced piece of work. So we've been working really closely with you and really closely with Jack to try to come to an evaluation that's going to be useful and that's going to be something which is a document which is a living.

Document and I think for me.

What I really like is because we've had such a partnership and because we're both on the same page. It's made it very easy for us to create, for example, a questionnaire that's gone out to around 200, 215 people at the moment. Now you've got a base of about.

3000 people that are that are Menfulness members.

So we've got a large number. So statistically really that we can ask a set of questions about Menfulness and we can start to try to pick out some, answers to try to look at some commonality, some things that that that are working in order to try to lift the lid off this black box.

So I want to talk about that in a little bit more detail, but just to tell you the other things that we're doing, obviously you know, we've been looking at the podcasts. So your podcasts, it would be a good idea if you talked to us about the podcast really

So do you want to tell us a little bit about what the podcasts are, yes.

**Sam Watling**

Yeah. Well, you're very kind. The start of this podcast about my experience. I started that because it just felt like the right thing to do. AndI wanted to talk more to some of the Members. You hear people in groups and events where people sort of share a bit of their story and you think.

That's a story, and some of these chaps are ready to tell it. And so we just applied for some funding from the two ridings community fund and they seemed to think it was a good idea too and so it started off really as, yeah, an opportunity to give our Members a platform to be able to share with other members.

What they were going through a community and it is that, you know, people will talk about it in the WhatsApp group and but also over time it's kind of become.

An opportunity to what we've realised is men will come to us, having listened to the podcast so that it's a bit of another opportunity to if people are anxious about coming to an event or setting foot through the door for the first time, they can just put their headphones in and figure out what we're all about without needing to ever talk to anybody else. And so.

It made complete sense. We've done about 25 episodes now and we're getting lots of lots of listeners. And so we know it's reaching people and again, when you came along and said we've got an interest in.

That was fascinating for me because again, I'm just switching it all the stuff on and talking to someone, but the idea that there might be something behind it that we can use to help other people is. Yeah, mind blowing. So back to you.

**Gary Shepherd**

Well, from an evaluation point of view, it does look as though the service that you're offering is really important. So on the back of looking at the at the health promotion messages that are in the podcast, the recorded podcasts, we're also in the middle of doing some research.

Speaking to individual Menfulness members that listen to the podcast.

And asking about their experiences and why the podcasts are so valuable as well. So we've got, we've got a couple of a couple of strings really to the to the podcast. You know what the mental health promotion message is, but also what are the men getting from the podcasts?

So in terms of the evaluation

This we think that's quite important. I think the podcast for some men is a gateway into the next part of engaging with other men and improving mental health and things like that.

Yeah, because they can be a fly on the wall for some of those conversations that they maybe want to have. You know, I think that was one of the reasons why I didn't talk about my anxiety is because none of my friends were talking about their anxiety. And my parents never really talked about their mental health. And so it wasn't something that I was hearing.

**Sam Watling**

And actually once you hear about it and once I was talking to other men who would seem to be really good at it, you can find the words much quicker and it feels a lot more. It's a lot less lonely when you're hearing other people talking about the same thing that you've got going on. So we've had topics around sort of OCD. We've had people with anxiety. We've had people with addiction, people who've been suicidal.

So we're just, we're just trying to talk to people, but and as I said before, everybody's story is very different. But we're all just normal people going out in the world still try.

You know, get on with it. So yeah, shameless plug. But if any of the.

listeners out there. I want to check out what we're about. Then, you know do have a listen.

To the Menfulness podcast.

Yeah, I'd recommend I'd recommend it. Definitely are there, are they all from, from York and the surrounding.

Area. Yes, so far we've had a couple of guests on who've been partners. So not everybody who's been on has been a member like we've had Sinead from Serendipity on to talk about counselling and what that might look like. So we're trying to broaden it a little bit, but all of it is going to be focused around, yeah.

What's going on with us? Why don't we talk about it more and what we're gonna do about it.

**Gary Shepherd**

Fantastic. So I said I'd come back to talking about the questionnaire that we've set. So really just talking about the questionnaire we've got some multiple choice question. It's not a statistical based questionnaire, it's more a descriptive questionnaire.

We spent, quite a long time really crafting it, didn't we? You know, you and Jack and I.

Trying to craft the questions and always asking what are the answers that we're trying to get from these questions? Why, you know, making every question very hard. And I think from the questionnaire we've got.

How many questions? Probably 10 questions or something like that.

**Sam Watling**

If that, I think it was about 8 or 9, I think.

**Gary Shepherd**

Yeah, yeah. Eight or nine simple questions. But questions inquiring about before the men joined Menfulness. How was their mental health, for example, how would they interact with other men?

What were the views on going to counselling or therapy and then asking questions, you know, since being part of Menfulness, What activities do you do and how is your mental health and what's your views on going to counselling and what your views on speaking to other men?

And you know, we're in the sort of quite early stages of nalysis of the questionnaires, but I think from the results so far it looks as though you know we're lifting the lid a little further from the black box and seeing that there's some quite significant results coming from the questionnaire around mental health acceptance of counselling and therapy and men.

That. Yeah, men that are actively changing the way they think about their mental health in quite substantial ways as well. So really blown away with the results of the questionnaire. I don't know what your,

**Sam Watling**

Views are, but I could see by the smile on your face and you can see the smile on my face. But the listeners can’t. How exciting that is for us both. I think because I mean, first of all can, if we could instead of calling it a black box, if we could call it like a multi coloured box because the logo is pink, blue and yellow. OK, so it's a multi coloured box. Got it. But yeahI think for us the excitement was building just by being allowed to be involved. I think we were ready to sort of when you came and so I've told us what the research would be about. We were like, we're ready for this. This is we're at that pivotal Point where we're starting to get more opportunities for funding and things like that. We need to know where we're gonna, put that funding. And so I think for us and we thought.

It would be. OK, well off you go then we'll give you the thumbs up and we'll give you access to the Members and we'll help. We didn't think we were going to be involved in looking at the questions and trying to decide what the potential outcome might be like what are we trying to prove here? So that's been amazing for us to just see what it's all about and have a go at it. And I think the idea that there's some already after a couple of weeks, there's already some potential patterns emerging that's just so exciting. I can't wait to tell you.

**Gary Shepherd**

The lads great and I and I think it's true to say, isn't it that Menfulness at its heart is a suicide prevention charity? Would that be?

**Sam Watling**

Correct. Yeah. That one of our constitutional objectives is to try and reduce.

Male suicide, you know? And so. You know, that's not always the most. It's not always the thing that's front and centre, although we do talk about it and now, like I say, the podcasts do feature that subject. What we think is if we can get men before they're at that stage, if we can bring men in and prevent them ever getting there, then that's job done, you know? And so we keep at it.

But yeah, very much so.

And I guess that that brings us on to now. So we're talking about the current projects at the at the moment with the with this Community grant. We've still got a number of months we've just started. Really. Yeah. So I'm, just wondering, thinking out loud what would be what would be the next aspect of the of the multicoloured box that we might look at

**Gary Shepherd**

Yeah. So one of the one of the things that I'm quite interested in is that Menfulnesss do have lots of members on WhatsApp groups and things like that. And I'm just intrigued about the way people interact on WhatsApp groups. one of my thoughts would be.Maybe we'll be able to do some research around trying to sort of speak to men that that contribute and try to understand the motivations of men that contribute on WhatsApp. I don't know what your thoughts might be.

**Sam Watling**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, one of the questions obviously was about how do you engage with Menfulness. And so I think looking at those results and finding out if there's, you know patterns there. And then following those avenues, that was what I was excited about. What you said in my mind, it was like the questionnaire to rule all questionnaires and it would take our members half an hour and it would have all these. And what I like is the idea that we need it short and snappy so that as many people as possible will take part. But then that might inform what the next bits are so that that that really fascinates me.

And you mentioned the WhatsApp. Yeah, it's - Idon't get it. I do get it because I'm part of it. I do understand why it's good. And that it's important to me, but we have a closed Facebook group that doesn't get anywhere near the same and engagement, it's used, but it's not used in the same way. So even though. There's two online spaces where people can speak and then be responded to.

One is used much differently to the other, so I'm really fascinated to find out more about the WhatsApp group and whenever we've talked about whether or not you know about its existence. We have had feedback saying that men feel like it's a lifeline to them to have that group there. And so that's, you know, that that's a big thing to have and we want to know why five people need it, and that's, you know, that's the exciting thing for us. It's not just what's happening, but why what? What is it about this that's working so.

**Gary Shepherd**

Yeah. Yeah. I think when you talk about the WhatsApp Group, obviously that's the main way that most men sort of interact the online stuff. But then you've got the offline stuff which is five-a-side football seems to be very popular. And video games night seem to very, very popular as well, yeah.

**Sam Watling**

Yeah. And the and the talking group, you know, each of them serves a different purpose. If you go along for a game of football, you'll have the camaraderie and the banter and the and the enjoyable game. And when you come off to be a sub, you'll have a bit of one-on-one time with the other sub that's there. You know, you can have a quick five minute conversation with the retro gaming night. You might. You were you go along, you're in a bar environment. You can have a drink. You can sit opposite someone while playing a computer game and you know the permissions there to share. It's a little more, but it's still it's a different entry level and then you've got the talking sessions at the the Community stadium facilitated by the York Knights.

This circle groups it's up to 10 people in each circle and you get an hour or so to sit and tell each other what's really going on and some of it's really heavy and some of it's really light and you can laugh and you can cry and it's intense. You know, I leave there literally buzzing and there's an

Not everyone's ready for that straight away, so yeah.

There's. I like that. We've got potential to try and find out in each of those areas what it is that's bringing men in and our men going from the football and then realising that they like that and maybe trying out the next thing and then does that then feed them on perhaps into the counselling even you know is what is the path through Menfulness. So yeah, very exciting.

**Gary Shepherd**

Very good. Yeah. And I and I think that finally the final thing to say is obviously at the end of the at the end of our. I think we're finished in July, but just June, July time, we're actually going to have a 1 day conference, which I'm really looking forward to. I've already asked a professor if they'd like tobe a keynote speaker. and I think it's a tremendous opportunity. A one day conference at York, St. John's to actually invite a lot of different people.

I just wondered what your thoughts were around that.

**Gary Shepherd**

It's so exciting. Yeah. I mean, it's.

**Sam Watling**

It's next summer and I'm already buzzing about it because. Be the preliminary results that you're already talking about. Sound positive and you know, I think. That's for us to have the credibility of a institution like Saint John behind us and literally facilitating us now and that that event down the line and having people who.

Really know what they're on about because you know we are just five blokes with full time jobs and families that are trying to do some, you know, and if there's people there that are saying this is a good place for men to find support and that actually it could be an example for how support for men should be done, then that's just, you know, game changing for us.

So I'll be very excited for that event and I can't wait, but we've got lots to do.

**Gary Shepherd**

We certainly do, yeah. Let's not run before we can walk. And I think that would be a great place towrap this up. Yeah. And thank you, Sam, for coming in. It's been it's been fantastic chatting to you.

**Sam Watling**

I love it. I hope you'll come on my podcast soon Gary.

**Gary Shepherd**

will do. Yeah, I will do. Thank you. Thanks. Cheers. Bye bye.