

A different vision

Introducing a hypnotherapy service has given York alcohol clients new inspiration in tackling their need for drink. Libby Ranzetta explains.

➤ York Alcohol Advice Service (YAAS) is a voluntary sector alcohol counselling organisation, serving the City of York. Like many such organisations, YAAS has a number of small projects running alongside its core service, and one of these is a hypnotherapy service for clients. This is an unusual intervention to be found within mainstream alcohol treatment provision, but YAAS Service Manager Ali Tubbs is delighted with its success.

Hypnotherapy is the application of hypnosis – a relaxed state of consciousness – as a form of treatment for relieving pain or conditions related to state of mind.

In terms of treating addiction or substance misuse, hypnotherapy is widely promoted for smoking cessation, but the research literature barely mentions it as a treatment for alcohol misuse. Despite its apparent popularity for smoking cessation, its efficacy is contested. Researchers in a recent Cochrane Review of the evidence concluded: 'We have not shown that hypnotherapy has a greater effect on six month quit rates than other interventions or no treatment'.

Against this rather unpromising background, advanced hypnotherapist Robert Williams offered YAAS a free three-month trial in April 2004. The outcomes were so good that the True-mark Trust picked up funding for the project to continue for 2005, and York City Council have provided funding from 2005/06.

The project takes clients who have been with YAAS for some time, and who are not doing particularly well with alcohol counselling. After an initial session

with a client, Williams prepares a personalised audiotape of relaxation and visualisation techniques that enable the client to reach a state of self-hypnosis.

There are suggestions at the end of the tape that work at the subconscious level on the client's belief structure; these suggestions help the client to perceive and respond to problems in a more constructive way. In the second session, Williams works on the underlying issues that are troubling the client. Often these do not include not drinking itself, but

'I have tried many times to give up alcohol, now I don't even think about it. Somebody asked me the other day how long I had been stopped and I didn't know.'

anxiety, guilt, grief, anger or depression instead.

Most of those using the service have anxiety problems; Williams uses psychotherapeutic techniques while the client is under hypnosis to find the cause of the anxiety, so that it can be addressed. About five sessions are sufficient for most clients, and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

Williams says: 'The relaxation techniques are proving very useful to all clients to help deal with situations differently in their everyday life. Other benefits clients mention include being

able to focus on certain emotions and learning how to manage them; feeling more positive about their ability to cope with stressful situations; and increased self-confidence. The main benefit however is resolving the emotional need for alcohol.'

Tony Ogden had been receiving counselling at YAAS for four months when it was suggested he try hypnotherapy. He was very sceptical initially but now says:

'I can't remember ever feeling like this. I started drinking at 13, have

the odd passing fancy. You don't have that fight; you know you can control it. He [Williams] was a godsend.'

Tony and Pat find it difficult to explain exactly how the hypnotherapy worked for them. Tony, who talks about hypnosis in terms of 'going under' explains:

'He [Williams] put me under... I wasn't under the first time. You go under and after two or three times you start to feel calmer, even going home. You feel in a daze. It didn't suddenly happen... over a period of weeks I felt better.

'He doesn't just put you under though; it's a therapy as well. He talks it all through before and after. I don't remember talking during [hypnosis] but I was going back to childhood. I didn't remember what I had said afterwards; Rob told me.

'I knew after the second session that it would work. Something was happening to me. I didn't understand how much was happening – I just knew.'

Williams would like to see hypnotherapy more widely used alongside traditional alcohol interventions. However, hypnotherapy is not currently a regulated industry and in theory anyone can practice. To work with this client group, practitioners should be suitably qualified.

For more details of the YAAS project, contact Alison Tubbs, Service Manager, York Alcohol Advice Service, 63 Bootham, York, YO30 7BT, telephone 01904 652104, email alison@yaas.info

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