



Cool Playback Tour 2013–2014

A Partnership between Playback Theatre South West and Cool Recovery

Playback Theatre South West - a charitable arts organisation set up to deliver workshops and performances to promote social inclusion and equality and diversity using Playback Theatre methods. **Mirror Mirror** is the performance company that delivered this project under the umbrella of Playback Theatre South West.

Cool Recovery - a charity set up to support people recovering from or affected by mental health issues

Between October 2013 and June 2014 Mirror Mirror in partnership with Cool Recovery ran a Playback Theatre Tour around community venues and schools in South Devon and Torbay. A total of ten performances were held for adult carers and young carers. The project ended with a **Big Review** where organisations involved in providing Health and Social Care, carers and support workers were all invited to hear our findings.

The process began with an invitation from Cool Recovery to perform at two events, these events included a performance for young carers and a separate one for adult carers. In these performances we discovered young people who hadn't previously been able to talk about their lives and were very keen to tell their stories. After the performance one young carer said that she had been a carer for over 10 years but had never discussed this with anyone. She hadn't realized that there were other people in a similar situation to her. The response inspired us to apply for funding to continue this work and we were awarded a grant from Big Lottery 'Awards for All'. This was the beginning our journey of working with young carers and support workers and a process of discovery.

Our five aims for the project:

1 Support Carers affected by mental health issues

From the feedback received from members of Cool Recovery and support workers it appears this aim was met. Support was provided in the form of empathic responses to issues raised by carers. The performance also enabled members of the audience to interact and connect with one another in a supportive environment.

"I feel that the Mirror Mirror people support me and move me along to a better place for myself"

2 Identify new carers

This was the most challenging of our aims to achieve. The events were held for carers and promoted by Carers' Services with support workers personally inviting and accompanying them to events, so in general the performances only reached people already identified as carers.



Playback Theatre South West

In future we hope to create events aimed at wider audiences to address issues related to caring and mental health so that people might self-identify as carers. It would be possible to implement this in a school setting where it could form part of an anti-bullying strategy.

3 Improve carers' mental and physical health and wellbeing

"The stories are reflected with empathy."

Empathy and the care and connection it enables are essential to the overall health of people communities and society as a whole. Playback Theatre cultivates empathy and as a result can connect directly to feelings of wellbeing.

"Another excellent performance, helping us to be thoughtful reflective and involved."

4 Develop and strengthen a family support network

Feedback suggested that the performances enabled people to develop and strengthen their connections to each other.

5 Raise awareness of carers and reduce the stigma of mental illness

Although audience members were mainly carers there was increased awareness of the similarities and differences between caring and responsibility and roles.

At an event for young people, those caring for people with mental health needs were listened to and responded to with sensitivity and compassion. Equally stories from people affected by, or with family members who are affected by, mental health issues were listened to with respect and care.

This indicated that the form of Playback Theatre helps to reduce the stigma of mental illness.

"Every time I have learned something new about the situation of others, their problems and solutions."

It was also hoped that carers would have the opportunity to experience and enjoy the effective power of Playback Theatre. This was certainly achieved as almost all feedback from participants was positive. Performances often included humour as well as profoundly moving moments. There was not a single event that didn't include widespread laughter, whether during the warm up workshop activities or during the performances, which signaled enjoyment and relaxation. Several people also remarked on how powerful and moving they found the performances.

"A very powerful creative tool."

Mirror Mirror helped people to realise that there are others struggling with similar issues, thereby reducing feelings of isolation. This was especially apparent at the young carers' events.



Playback Theatre South West

Feedback

"I found the Playback Theatre event to be very moving and powerful. Although we know about our young carers and why they are caring you seem to hear it differently when they share their own stories. All young carers should have the opportunity to attend such an event. I think one of the biggest outcomes is how the children and young people are able to learn empathy and offer peer support."

Katherine Mullan, Project Manager for Young Devon and Lead Practitioner for young carers

"Martin and I are heartened by the impact of Playback Theatre on the carers. It reframes issues and situations, enables change, develops and strengthens relationships, is cathartic and fun. We are saddened by the apparent lack of interest and involvement from other areas of mental health and social care."

Claudia Benzies, Co-Manager for Cool Recovery, Devon

Feedback from audience members at the Big Review highlighted people's concern about young carers and they felt the Playback Theatre model should be taken into schools as much as possible. There was also some discomfort around the culture of denial perpetuating the stigma of being a carer and the resultant bullying. Playback Theatre promotes empathy and emotional learning which has been shown to reduce bullying and aggression in children. In this way PT could form part of any schools anti bullying strategy

"Empathy can go a long way in preventing bullying, what's more, studies show that kids who are empathetic have better relationships and perform better in school." S. Gordon. Author of '7 Ways to Teach Empathy and Prevent Bullying'.

Most of the aims of this project were met and Mirror Mirror and Cool Recovery collaborated well to begin the transformation of feelings of shame at being a carer into feelings of pride. The events have fostered feelings of support, connection, empathy and understanding and raised awareness around the issues facing carers.

Ongoing work that strengthens relationships between all the stakeholder organizations will promote effective collaboration that enhances the support offered for carers and young carers. To build understanding in schools raising awareness of carers and the incredible work they do.