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Social Confidence Groups 2

Stories of students transitioning from positions of "shame and hiding" to "whole-hearted" living

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Abstract

By 2013, approximately 96 students within a large tertiary institution in Aotearoa New Zealand had participated in 12 Social Confidence groups to overcome difficulties with social anxiety. This article reports the results of a small-scale study undertaken to investigate students' experiences of the groups to find out what they valued in the programme and what they did afterwards that was helpful, and to understand how they made meaning of social anxiety in their lives. Qualitative research methods including individual interviews and a focus group with five participants were utilised in this study, which was informed by narrative inquiry as it allowed for rich responses that could not have been captured within methods that give participants a "smaller voice." Through their experience of taking part in a Social Confidence Group and their own efforts, the participants in this study reported shifting from positions of "shame and hiding" to "whole-hearted" living.

Keywords: tertiary students, social anxiety, group programme, whole-hearted living, qualitative research

Since 2005 I have worked as a counsellor in a busy health practice within a large tertiary institution.[1] I began offering a group programme to socially anxious students in 2008 in response to the high number of students presenting with social difficulties and their consequent experiences of isolation and lowered self-worth. The Social Confidence Group is described fully in "Social Confidence Groups 1" (see pp. 35–51 of this issue).

Part of one's self-esteem comes from a sense of belonging. Feeling invalidated, or excluded from group membership, can adversely affect mental health and create a poor

sense of self and low self-worth (Brown, 2011). Individual counselling can help clients develop confidence and self-worth, but therapeutic groups have the power to create a greater sense of belonging (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Healing interactions with others who struggle with similar issues, in a supportive climate of mutual respect and understanding, can create connection, opportunities for healing, and increased self-worth.

Social researcher Brené Brown has studied the anatomy of connection. She collected thousands of stories over six years from focus groups and individual interviews, and found that people with a sense of worthiness also hold a strong sense of belonging (Brown, 2011, 2012). Brown compared those with a sense of unworthiness or low self-worth, and those with a sense of worthiness, whom she described as "whole-hearted." She found that whole-hearted people demonstrated the courage to connect and not need to be perfect; compassion towards self and others; an ability to be authentic rather than being who others thought they should be; and, most surprisingly for Brown, the willingness to embrace their vulnerability.

As facilitator of the Social Confidence groups, I had heard comments from many participants over the years expressing great relief at finding others like themselves. I also knew of members forming strong friendships beyond the life of their groups. Within the groups I saw students beginning to make progress in developing their confidence, and I wondered how taking part in the programme might have contributed to their lives and wellbeing over time. Completing my Master of Counselling degree provided me with the opportunity to conduct research into the outcomes by interviewing former participants from these groups. The findings are the focus of this article.

Conducting the research

The aims of this exploratory qualitative study were to discover what the participants found uniquely helpful in and beyond the group; their own ways of coping and growing; and how they made meaning of their experiences of social anxiety. A thematic analysis approach, informed by narrative inquiry (Morgan-Fleming, Riegle, & Fryer, 2007), was used to interpret the data and provide a rich, detailed, and complex account of the experiences captured (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Participants

Of the 96 possible participants, only those who attended a minimum of four out of seven group sessions were recruited for this study. This resulted in approximately 85 people being contacted and invited to participate by an intermediary recruiter, to avoid any possibility of coercion regarding their decision about taking part in the

project. Those who were interested in doing so were asked to contact me by email, and the first five of the seven who responded were invited to take part. They included two females and three males aged between 20 and 30, whose ethnicities included Asian, South-East Asian, and European/Pākehā. Four were in their final year of study. One had completed a postgraduate qualification and was working. Time since the conclusion of their groups ranged from six months to three years. Although this is not a representative sample, the aim in this small-scale qualitative study was to elicit in-depth understanding of the experiences of some students with social anxiety who had completed the group programme.

Positioning of the researcher

Qualitative researchers acknowledge and account for the influences they might have on the research process, both as a person ("personal reflexivity") and as a theorist or thinker ("epistemological reflexivity") (Willig, 2013). In this case I held multiple relationships with the participants: I was the researcher, had been their group facilitator, and had also seen most as their counsellor. One of my strengths as a researcher was my insider knowledge as group facilitator, which enabled me to understand what participants were talking about and referring to, in terms of group process. The research interviews were held in a different space from my counselling room, to physically differentiate our research roles from our previous relationship.

On a different matter, if the others who responded to the invitation to take part in the research had been excluded, there was a danger that they could feel hurt, given my former roles as their counsellor and/or group facilitator. In lieu of being involved as participants, they were therefore invited to meet as a "member-checking" group (see below for explanation).

Interviews and focus group

Interview questions were designed to elicit narratives of participants' experiences as university students impacted by social anxiety, and to find out what they valued in their social-confidence-building group and what they did afterwards that was helpful in further developing their social confidence. Semi-structured individual interviews were held with each participant followed by a focus group including all five participants. The recordings were all transcribed and thematically analysed. When the summary of findings from the individual interviews was given to the focus group, the participants agreed that it was hard to separate out what they had said in their own interviews because there were so many shared experiences.

Member check

In qualitative research member-checking is considered to be one of the most valuable techniques for establishing validity and credibility (Lincoln & Egon, 1986). The two additional volunteers beyond the original five who were interested in taking part in the research, one male and one female, were therefore invited to participate in the "member-checking." Aged between 25 and 40, their ethnicities were European and New Zealand European/Pākehā. Both had graduated and were now actively engaged with their careers. Time since completion of their Social Confidence groups ranged from three to five years. They were shown a summary of findings from the individual interviews and the focus group for checking and reviewing.

The validity or trustworthiness of findings is defined by how accurately they represent participants' realities and are credible to them (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In the member-checking group, Jane (a pseudonym) said she was quite shocked when she read the findings because they read as if she had written them. She said there were things in there that she regarded as unique to her experience and she had been stunned to see those. John agreed and said the findings contained a lot of the same views as he held, as well as similarity to his own experience in his group.

Results and discussion

Social anxiety: Trauma, adjustment, and meaning-making

Participants in the study used words like "alien," "abnormal," and "weird" to describe their experiences of themselves prior to joining their Social Confidence groups. This is consistent with cognitive behavioural research, whereby fear of negative evaluation is the primary factor for people with social anxiety: a tendency to assume that others view one as inadequate, boring, or peculiar (e.g., Duke, Krishnan, Faith, & Storch, 2006; Purdon, Antony, Monteiro, & Swinson, 2001; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). However, Bourne (2011) has described people prone to anxiety as tending to have the following traits: creativity, intuitive ability, emotional sensitivity, empathy, amiability, and ability to be intimate. Social Confidence Group members have consistently appreciated Bourne's positive description, and most of the participants in this study described themselves as shy and sensitive.

> *I was naturally shy; social anxiety an issue my whole life…we note people around us so we can feel when other people are anxious and I guess feel when people are confident…it's not completely negative being susceptible to social anxiety because it means you're a listener and empathetic…* (Karen)

According to Thoits (2010), four decades of sociological stress research has revealed that when stressors such as negative events, chronic strains, and traumas are measured comprehensively, their damaging effects on physical and mental health are substantial. Social anxiety tends to develop in shy children in late childhood or adolescence, often between ages 11 and 19, usually when faced with increased peer pressure at school (Bourne, 2011). School is one of the major sites of identity formation where acceptance and belonging are paramount (Bray & Hutchinson, 2007; Lashlie, 2004). Experiences of emotional wounding and/or trauma when young can be a key factor for people with a diagnosis of social anxiety, making the ability to place trust in self and others extremely difficult (Bourne, 2011). Most participants shared that they had experienced some form of trauma such as abuse or bullying, difficulty with cultural adjustment, or sexual identity issues.

> *I think social anxiety, less confidence…started out from when I was little being bullied (like three or four years old)…it was just verbal bullying, really…what I can remember is that from a very young age…being told off (a lot)…if you've been told off so much…I guess [you] shut up…and kind of give way…I was chatty and I think…I was a bit abusive. I was the bullier (at primary) and then I became bullied…I had to move to the corner.* (Michael)

> *At intermediate I did get bullied quite a bit…made a really big impact on me anxiety-wise and my self-esteem…* (Karen)

In the focus group it was agreed that bullying at school was a major factor for either themselves or other people they knew in their Social Confidence groups.

Three participants discussed issues related to sexual identity as being relevant to their lack of social confidence, reflecting the findings of Pachankis and Goldfried (2006) as well as literature identifying minority students as at greater risk of social isolation (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009; Thoits, 2010).

> *I [became] too afraid to do anything…in case I would be socialising with someone and they would ask me if I was gay.* (Gary)

> *…never having had a boyfriend…and feeling awkward around guys…made me realise this was because I was a lesbian.* (Karen)

Peter attributed his social anxiety to the trauma of cultural adjustment.

> *So I think the reason for all this anxiety is because…I moved around a lot…I grew up in New Zealand…I came here when I was 9…and then when I was 13 I moved*

> *back to Asia…it was the complete opposite of what I had experienced in New Zealand. I tried persuading my parents…[to return]…they didn't really understand…they weren't aware of the whole cultural difference…I lost myself…some of life's important tools to help me become a complete being.*

Such experiences had resulted in reactions of feeling shame and/or hiding, consistent with Brown's (2011, 2012) research.

> *…Shame is the big thing…it keeps you hiding it [anxiety]…and trying to protect yourself from sharing it with other people.* (Jane)

Life as a tertiary student with social anxiety: Before and after the Social Confidence Group

Prior to seeking help, the participants were struggling at university with a range of challenges. Most reported difficulty with academic issues at undergraduate level, such as attendance and/or participation in lectures, tutorials, and group work. Studies by Cooke, Bewick, Barkham, Bradley, and Audin (2006) and Stallman (2010) indicated that psychological stress may increase over time for university students, while these authors also acknowledged a lack of longitudinal research in this area. Participants in the current project agreed that the further their studies progressed, the more their stress levels and pressures to actively participate increased.

All struggled to engage in wider university life. In the focus group, they agreed that joining clubs was "way too scary" and hard. Peter, for example, tried to join clubs in his first year but found it too challenging, as he lacked enough social experience. Janet was involved in voluntary work while studying but had great difficulty speaking to customers prior to joining her Social Confidence Group. Their experiences reflected those described in the literature (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011). Most participants felt lonely and most had experienced difficulty coping with the increased pressure in their developmental stage to have active social lives and develop intimate relationships (Dacey & Kenny, 1994; Johnson, 2009). With the loss of parental supervision, Gary became isolated and addicted to Wi-Fi, a reaction that is also consistent with research that suggests many students struggle making the shift from dependence to independence (Dacey & Kenny, 1994; Johnson, 2009).

A sense of belonging: Gaining confidence, initiative, and engagement

The participants in this study said the group gave them a "sense of belonging," and some even said the group "saved their studies." Jane had been unable to go to any

tutorials or work in group situations, even finding going to lectures difficult, and had dropped out of many papers, similar to many socially anxious students' self-reports over the years. Although it was still hard, after completion of her group she managed to complete her studies and graduate. She felt great pride in this.

In her final year of undergraduate studies, Janet also attested to her increased confidence:

> *I'm coping better than [before]…I [have] the confidence to go into the lectures and labs and deal with those kinds of situations [now]…Not everyone has to contribute a lot, but I wanted to, so that was important to me.*

In addition, Janet described ways in which she valued groups and took the initiative:

> *[In the Social Confidence Group] I got used to [groups] and [also] got experience being an organiser…that then flowed on to tutorials…I value group situations now…talking and discussing things…if one person organises, then everyone …contributes more…I'm more aware if everyone is in a group or not, and if they're not then I form a group with those people…I also give other people the opportunity to [take the] initiative…but if no one does then I do…I value group discussion because ideas are better formed that way.*

Participation in the group had also helped with her volunteer job.

> *[at work]…I'm getting better at the social confidence thing, at least I can smile at people…I can talk to people for two minutes…it's not too much pressure. And that kind of flows on to my tutorials…knowing that I can commit to one thing like volunteering for three hours a week. If I can do that, then I can come to a tutorial for two hours and relax there.*

Karen had graduated and was teaching when she took part in this research. Her comments are indicative of her compassion for others:

> *It helps me with my teaching now because when I'm in front of the group or with the students I think, well statistically, at least a few of them probably have the same feelings so it helps me a lot and helps me accept that being a bit awkward is okay…just be myself.*

Compassion and the confidence to take the initiative are also reflected in Michael's comments:

> *People are waiting for you to do something and you have to do it…you can't have everyone else thinking that…or nothing really happens…If you see someone just sitting there alone…before this group…[I would] ignore them…But you can see that they're lonely…you can initiate talking…or join a group and talk.*

The group provided a stepping stone for these participants to leading more fully engaged lives. Gary got a part-time job tutoring in the community, which helped improve his confidence beyond the group:

> *I have to talk to the students…their parents…there's a range of people I deal with…cool dude type people and popular girls…you have to be able to say things with conviction…I have to start the talking, asking them how stuff is going…I was always really nervous going to their house…but now I don't feel nervous about meeting them and I feel like I can, you know, be socially comfortable with them.*

He also found the courage to go overseas:

> *…six weeks by myself [overseas]…for a summer school thing. I did have a lot of anxious moments while I was over there but when I got back…I kind of just woke up out of that funk that I'd been in for probably the last 18 months. I realised I had a life to live…everything was just so much easier…and that's kind of just gone on from there. So I definitely think I'm more socially confident.*

The Social Confidence Group experience: Perceived benefits

Participants in this study thought that eight two-hour sessions were the minimum in order for the group programme to be effective, consistent with recommended timeframes (Gladding, 2012). They perceived several aspects of the group as helpful. These included breathing, learning to make friends through modelling in the group, experiencing being valued in their diversity, and having their struggles with social anxiety normalised. The courage they showed in self-disclosure helped trust and safety to develop in their groups, a reflexive process that in turn enabled them to acknowledge their vulnerability. For most, these aspects of the group programme and dynamics contributed to performing better in their studies, and experiencing less fear and taking more risks in social situations.

Breathing techniques

Learning how to use breathing to calm down and manage symptoms of anxiety stood out as being helpful for a number of people. John found it particularly useful in job

interviews. Peter spoke in detail about breathing, and what he said was consistent with the literature on social anxiety and chronic stress (Bourne, 2011):

> *…the sympathetic system…it's related to the fight-or-flight response; it helps us to…deal with stressful situations. And because I thought I was under stress so much, that sympathetic system was in overdrive…the parasympathetic system [had] not kicked in so I wasn't able to calm myself…to activate the parasympathetic system you have to practise…abdominal breathing…so practise ten times in a day or practise in everyday situations…I found out how severe my anxiety was…because the sympathetic system is always on, it pumps cortisol…hormones.*

Modelling in the group

People generally wanted to be confident for a purpose, such as making more friends or performing better in their studies. Modelling in the group helped with this.

> *I saw how it's done…you take turns…you don't need to agree with people…you can just listen…without having to jump in or argue…and then sometimes you do need to speak up and say what you believe…I took more responsibility to engage with people after the group.* (Jane)

Valuing diversity and normalising experiences

Universities have become more socially and culturally diverse, with more international students than ever before (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011). A Social Confidence Group rule was to respect and tolerate diversity of opinions, belief systems, and sexual orientations so that people could be themselves in the group. The participants in the study perceived that social and cultural diversity were valued in the groups, as was a mix of genders and stages of study. In the focus group a participant said the groups definitely shouldn't be "just for first year students." Diversity creates the opportunity for richer learning and wider understandings, and the participants valued being inspired by others as well as being an inspiration to others themselves.

Alongside valuing diversity, normalising their experiences was seen to be of great value. Meeting others at university like themselves, around the same age, who were struggling with similar issues, helped them realise that many other people felt the same way. The normalising aspects of the group meant that rather than noticing their differences from others, they built trust in themselves and with each other as they began noticing their similarity to others, thereby becoming freer of fear of judgement and negative evaluation, consistent with CBT research (Damer, Latimer, & Porter, 2010; Heimberg, Becker, Goldfinger, & Vermilyea, 1985; Purdon et al., 2001). The more

comfortable and safe people feel within a group situation, the more they will take the risk to be visible (Benson, 1987; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

> *It was a good experience to see that other people in university…around my age bracket, were going through the same thing or something similar…you're not kind of like an alien…we were all in the same boat…I thought it was just me and a few other people…there's lots of other people like that.* (Michael)

> *It was good to be able to talk…to socialise with people…experiencing the same stuff…it really removed…awkwardness or anxiety that at the time I was having with people…that didn't have the same issues as I did.* (Gary)

Students who were interested in joining groups were told they could come along to the first session to check it out but they did not have to make a commitment to participate until session 2. Commitment was something Janet spoke about:

> *I guess one other thing I've learnt from other people in the social group is…being reliable…you make up a time to show up and be there. It's not like I [went to] a social confidence group and now I'm socially confident. It's, you went to a social confidence group and you're keeping that up to a degree and meeting up with people [from the group]. And you're doing other things and working on different areas of your life and that indirectly affects your social confidence.*

Courage, safety, and vulnerability

According to Brown (2012), vulnerability is at the heart of meaningful human experience. The Social Confidence Group invites whole-heartedness—the courage to show up and be visible, drop the "mask" or adapted self, and be authentic, honest, and sometimes willing to share painful experiences. The findings reveal that the participants in this study were more able to show their vulnerability, which took courage and trust in self and others, in order to connect in an authentic and sometimes vulnerable way.

> *We could sort of help each other in a way or sort of inspire or encourage each other to kind of open up.* (Gary)

Safety-seeking behaviours were generally linked to emotional beliefs around lack of self-worth and fear of being judged. The building of trust in self and others in the group directly influenced people's lives outside of the group, as described by Michael:

> *You can talk about what you've gone through and people listen…and you learn from other people too…The stuff that you talk [about] in the group, people appreciate that*

> *and then you go outside and you see that people kind of appreciate that from other people, when you see other people talking…so…this is how it's done.*

Feeling safe meant they could risk more sharing and try being more visible, enabling them to get to know each other in depth. Words such as hope, trust, strength, courage, open-mindedness, support, inspiration, appreciation, confidence, encouragement, relief, optimism, and comfortableness were used to describe their experiences. Empathy, courage, and compassion were valued within the group, qualities Brown (2012) has defined as part of shame resilience.

Individual counselling, group participation, and ongoing connection

One clear finding from this study was participants' agreement that taking part in a group is more effective than only individual counselling for social anxiety issues. Some no longer needed counselling after the group. Others continued with counselling and made good progress, which they attributed to the group's having moved them forward more quickly.

Although no other study could be found that directly encouraged friendships among group members and maintaining connections beyond the group experience, all participants in this study wanted to continue meeting with people in their groups. Most found it difficult to carry on meeting after their groups had finished, and would have liked help with this, but those who did found it invaluable.

> *…it is hard to…keep it going on without [you] organising something…they were really nice people…you don't have to worry about being awkward with them…it's a shame we haven't been able to sustain any contact…you always should in theory, be able to talk about how you're going, what you find difficult.* (Gary)

> *Continuing to meet up motivated me to keep going…I guess we all liked each other so much…we wanted to keep meeting up…it's nice to know that you've got that support and there's people there if you were having issues or troubles so it's like a life-long safety net.* (Karen)

The focus group recommended that in the first few weeks following the completion of the group programme, future group members should meet up informally at the same time as their group had met.

A unique finding from the member-checking group was the value of Facebook as a form of communication for continuing bonds. This finding is consistent with literature on new forms of connection changing the face of how people interact (McPherson, Brashears, & Smith-Lovin, 2006). As mentioned previously, John and

Jane had completed their groups some time ago, had already moved forward in their lives, and were engaged with their career paths. They spoke about Facebook as being a helpful way to keep in touch with people from groups over time. It was also viewed by John and Jane as an intimate place where you could get support from other group members because they knew how you felt.

The question of goal-setting

Although goals are considered extremely useful for people trying to overcome the grip of anxiety or fear in social situations (Bourne, 2011), and goal-setting was a topic of discussion in the focus group, participants were not necessarily in agreement. Some thought there should be more emphasis on goals, while others disagreed. One person wanted the goals to be set by the group leader and the members to be accountable, while another liked the fact that people could work at their own pace. Yet another person thought too much emphasis could create a climate of comparison, and worried about bad feelings arising in people who were unable to achieve their goals. Janet identified consistency and taking "baby steps" as being most helpful:

> *If I know that I can't do something, unless it's related to like assignments or schoolwork, then I know to…not put myself too much out of the comfort zone knowing that I won't be able to cope. Because people say you push yourself out of the comfort zone, but…I've already been doing that and it doesn't work…I think the main thing is to like whatever I start…I want it to be consistent…just knowing myself better and picking what I can do and can't do…just taking baby steps is the main priority right now…I mean I do value a lot of things, but I just can't do them all at once starting right now. I can maybe do one thing at a time and then once I can manage that, then do that as well as another thing.*

In the groups I had reminded people to be proud of their efforts rather than focusing too hard on their results, as many students are prone to perfectionism and comparison.

> *[The group] inspired me to say yes to doing things that I would have said no to before, even if I was scared, because I knew at the next group I could bring it up and say my experiences even if it didn't turn out well.* (Karen)

Additional recommendations

Improving communication skills is a vital component of the Social Confidence Group. Only Gary wanted more focus on this, which may have been because he missed this session. He made some useful suggestions, such as identifying "daunting experiences"

coming up for people and using the Social Confidence Group to help people prepare, as well as going outside together in pairs during group time and debriefing afterwards. Janet also suggested that people go outside during group time.

Looking back: The value of having social confidence groups in high school

Reflecting on his earlier battles with social anxiety, Michael spoke sadly of his inability to approach the school counsellors and put words to his struggles when he needed help. Had a programme been offered, that would have been like a hand reaching out to him and he would have signed up and accessed the support he needed in those earlier years.

> *In high school there wasn't a programme like this…I still didn't know how to approach the counsellors…I knew I had that sort of problem…I didn't tell anyone…because I didn't know how to tell or what to tell…it was difficult to say [those] things…and then I just found this group on the Uni website and it was really good…it really fitted in with what I was [experiencing]…So I joined [the group] because I wanted to do something about it…to build a better life I guess, not to kind of hide away.*

Transition towards "whole-hearted" living

The following vignettes of the participants in this study demonstrate greater self-worth and a stronger sense of belonging, and show a shift from feeling weird and worrying about what other people think to "I am enough" and the whole-hearted traits that Brown (2011, 2012) identified. Karen, for example, still experienced feelings of "trepidation" at times, but it didn't hold her back any more from living her life authentically and embracing her vulnerability. Ridding herself of some unhealthy friendships, she developed some close and valuable ones, and she had met somebody and had a relationship. She described the group as having set her life in motion. She was now able to say to herself:

> *Being a bit awkward is okay…just be myself.*

Gary had confidence before he came to university but had experienced it being stripped away when he began questioning his sexual identity. As well as becoming more engaged in his studies, he gained experience through a part-time job which helped him to become more sociable and he found the courage to go travelling. He had found the confidence to start living his life and was more able to embrace his authenticity, while gaining a new appreciation of others and a greater awareness of the wider world.

It's really helped me to develop…[an] internal strength.

Janet described herself as generally coping better, having become much more confident at work. This had a flow-on effect, as well as providing a boost to her studies, as she now participated in tutorials and was an active member in groups, helping her to enjoy university life. She was compassionate and caring towards others and sensitive to including people who might otherwise be left out of group work. She valued self-care, which she had learned in the group, and that helped her build resilience and be gentler with herself. She was more aware of her strengths and vulnerabilities, which meant she didn't push herself too hard but was consistent, committed to steady steps forward, and to living her life. Significantly, she was no longer worried about how others saw her, which gave her a new sense of freedom.

I guess if people don't like me, that's also okay in a way.

Peter had been taken in and cared for like a son by a family he really admired. He had finally found some "solid ground" inside himself and felt calmer: having grown in wisdom, he saw himself as more able to see the bigger picture of life and to let go of some painful past experiences. Peter was unique in that he identified as being depressed, and of all the participants, the group seemed to have made the least difference to him. Nevertheless, he said he had been able to move away from pain, depression, and bitterness and was aware of a feeling of compassion towards himself and his parents, whom he now viewed as having been unaware of the impact that changing cultures had had on him. While he valued aspects of the group programme such as learning relaxation skills, he attributed his recovery to the kindness of his friend's family towards him and being introduced to spiritual practices by this family.

> *…having a spiritual belief is really crucial in recovering from mental illness or anxieties…[it] provides a stable ground…I was lost for quite a long time…Not letting go [of the past] means being caged.*

Michael's group had "got the ball rolling" for him. He had found the courage to initiate and to invite people over, and now had more friends. He was caring and compassionate towards others and would even go up to other students if he thought they were lonely. He now realised that many people were waiting for somebody to do something. He felt more appreciated by others and was increasingly confident in social situations. Sometimes he still felt nervous but he would try to relax and encourage himself, and he now felt that "anything is possible, really."

> *The SC Group gave me the possibility to reinvent myself.*

Jane attributed the Social Confidence Group with setting her on a better path and saving her studies. She learnt how to be herself in the group and she took that authenticity with her into the world, which meant she could relax and be more true to herself there too, including when going for job interviews.

> *Showing who you are I think. . is really important…that's to me what gets you the job, because you really are being you and you're using the braveness I think to be you…then…[they] go yeah, we want her working for us.*

She had spent a lot of energy hiding her anxiety and now she had learnt to embrace her vulnerability and view it as more of a protector rather than something to be feared. She could reassure herself now and had more self-trust and self-belief. Like others, she also realised that many people felt scared and nervous, which developed her compassion for others and meant she didn't have to put so much energy into hiding her nervousness.

> *I feel pride in myself.*

John had also developed more confidence in himself, saying that he felt much braver as he had steadily made himself do more things over time which had helped him to grow in confidence. He was more able to be himself and was willing to continue learning and growing. He said that he would not have done a lot of things he did at the time of interview if he hadn't gone to his Social Confidence Group.

> *In my training after the group…I've done all the role plays, I've been given all the tricks…at the end of the day it is still applying the skills from the group.*

Conclusion

Given the nature of their difficulties, students who experience social anxiety could be seen as less likely to take part in either groups or research, which makes this study of special interest. While eliciting data about only a small sample of the Social Confidence Group participants, the use of individual interviews and a focus group enabled them to describe their experiences in depth. Their voices contribute to the body of research into social anxiety, connection, and the potential value of taking part in a group programme to help students overcome social anxiety-related difficulties and build a greater sense of belonging and self-worth (Stallman, 2010). While not a large-scale longitudinal investigation, this study makes a modest contribution to the limited research into psychological stress and pressure beyond the first year of tertiary study.

Nevertheless, there are limitations that need to be acknowledged when interpreting the results. Only a small number of students responded to the invitation to take part in the research. Students are usually a transient population, with many of them at university for only three years. Some email addresses of those who were contacted were no longer active, and many students had already moved forward in their lives and possibly gone overseas. International students were not represented in this study due to the fact that many of them would have already gone back home. These factors could create challenges in undertaking any larger-scale, longitudinal research into such group programmes.

In addition, of those who did get the invitation, many may not have been willing to take part, perhaps because of concerns about their privacy. People who were not doing well may have chosen not to be involved, so it is difficult to know how typical the experiences of this sample may be. Nevertheless, the information about the participants' experiences here reflects the potential of this kind of group work, even though the data cannot be seen as representative across the whole spectrum of those who have taken part.

My hope was that this research would be of practical value and interest to other tertiary as well as secondary school counsellors, and to students who suffer from social anxiety, in addition to providing a positive experience for those who took part. The findings suggest they felt respected, valued, and affirmed as participants, and they enjoyed reporting how well they were doing. I hoped this research would serve to improve current student support services. It has already begun informing my own practice in making improvements to the Social Confidence Groups, including incorporating the recommendations to extend the communication skills exercises by going outside during group time, and to meet up at the same time the week after the group programme ends.

With future groups, seeking feedback from the students at the conclusion is recommended. A follow-up survey seeking information about the longer-term effects of the programme for participants is also recommended, at a suitable time within a year, when there is more likelihood that students can still be contacted.

There are few examples of effective and cost-effective social support interventions (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). A report into mental health and wellbeing in tertiary institutions (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011) recommended the consideration and investigation of more social initiatives. The Social Confidence Group is an example of such a social initiative within a tertiary institution that has been investigated through qualitative research.

The university counselling service has adopted a brief-therapy model and students can only access six counselling sessions per year, which makes attending a group programme potentially complementary to counselling. Experience suggests that students need to have the option of both, rather than having to choose one over the other. It takes time for some to feel ready to join a group, particularly those suffering from social anxiety, and some may need individual counselling first, even if only for two to three sessions. However, the option of counselling after a group programme is necessary, as sometimes painful matters arise that require the private space of individual counselling.

The experience of one participant has also indicated the value of offering this form of group support in secondary schools for students struggling with social anxiety. In both secondary and tertiary settings, it seems that an initiative by counsellors to advertise a social confidence group programme can enable students to access help when their silent struggles would otherwise prevent them from reaching out and taking the initiative for themselves.

I am very grateful to the participants for their courage and generosity in taking part in this research project. For practitioners in tertiary contexts there are usually few opportunities to hear about clients' progress and wellbeing beyond the life of such a group. While it has been inspiring for me to hear the participants' stories, their experiences do not necessarily reflect those of others.

Note

1. This article has been written in the voice of the first author, Nisarg Dey, who carried out the research and facilitated the Social Confidence groups. If readers are interested in running Social Confidence groups, either at tertiary or secondary level, Nisarg Dey is very happy to be contacted.

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