

## Come Outside! Case study

### Improving wellbeing for veterans suffering from PTSD

Area

Swansea

The group

Change Steps

Supported by

Change Steps Charity

Start date

March 2015

Total participants

14

Number of sessions

10

Session types

Bushcraft

#### ABOUT THE GROUP

Change Steps supports veterans with drug and alcohol misuse issues, often arising from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They provide a mentoring service, signpost to other support, provide positive activities and support people into employment. Change Steps Swansea were contacted by their Merthyr Tydfil branch who had engaged with Come Outside! and they contacted the Regional Coordinator for the Swansea area.

#### COME OUTSIDE! ACTIVITIES

The group initially took part in a five week programme of foraging, bushcraft, canyoning and outdoor cooking.

The sessions took place in a secluded, quiet place, with no mobile phones etc. It provided a safe space to help the group interact and reminded them of their time in the forces. It provided some respite from their problems.

The sessions involved a wide range of age groups and physical capabilities – the younger people did the canyoning and the older people helped build fires and cook food. It was inclusive and there was something for everyone to take part in.

#### IMPACT ON THE GROUP

All the group members were previously confident, skilled and physically active during their time in the forces. However, PTSD has led to many being isolated and inactive, with many not leaving the house. Being part of the group has helped them engage first in group activities, and then in the wider world. It has helped to build their confidence back up and remind them of the skills they once had.



## What the support organisations said

“The outdoor provider developed a real connection with the group; it could have been a risk, taking them out and encouraging them to take part in activities that reminded them of their time in the forces. But instead it reminded them of how they used to be and feel, and this had a massive impact on them. They are really keen to do more – wanting more challenges and even overnight camping trips. This is a big step forward for many of our group”

A volunteer (who previously suffered from PTSD) told us:

**“I got involved in Change Steps about 15 months ago. I was suffering from PTSD and, like a lot of men, struggled in therapy. I was on my own, no family or no friends and sometimes I got aggressive and violent. Since I got involved in Change Steps I’ve never looked back – I now volunteer here and support the other lads. Come Outside! got us involved in survival shelters, cooking, canyoning etc. PTSD drags down your self-esteem and self-worth. Come Outside is reconnecting the guys with skills they had in the forces, which reinforces their self-esteem. It’s reconnected them with that, giving them their self-worth back again. You can see the change in the guys – the team spirit. Jeff [bushcraft provider] was great – being ex-military – great banter, got on with the guys. I loved it - I learnt some new skills and it was good for me to bond with the boys that I’m helping. It has helped me show them the way. Come Outside! wasn’t about PTSD; it encouraged great camaraderie and bonding – being outside and learning core skills.**

**I think it’s encouraged more people to go back to an active life – a lot of us have injuries but this has shown us we can still do it! It provided us with a challenge and an incentive to do more. We want to go out again soon – really looking forward to it. If we could afford it we’d do it every week.”**

## What the participants said

“Jumping off the waterfall was pretty terrifying! I’ve got a fear of water and heights, and it was a good challenge. It was a really good experience – I need to do more outdoors. It helps us to get out and be more confident in ourselves, helping us to mingle with and meet other people. A few years ago I locked myself in the house, I had no confidence. I met these people and started helping out and it’s really helped me. I’m now trying to get a job”

“I got involved about 6 months ago. We meet up every week, we do things to get us out the house and stop us moping around. It’s like a family really. The bushcraft was probably the best thing I’ve done since leaving the forces. Jeff was a soldier and from the minute we met him there was banter flying – the connection we had was really, really good. What he was doing was jogging my memory – for example helping me remember how to find north with my watch – I’d remember that I used to know this, all these skills I’d forgotten about. He knew that – he’s a clever man – able to talk to us in a way that we understood. It’s bonded us all, we all started working together as a team again. Some of us hadn’t worked together before, but we were given tasks to do – it highlighted that we didn’t need to be taught how to do this as we knew it all really”

## IMPACT ON THE ORGANISATION

The Come Outside! sessions provided a different approach for the organisation – normally they provide drop-in support and peer mentoring advice. Come Outside! has provided different opportunities for the group which were suitable for veterans. The outdoor activity provider that delivered the 5 week course was also ex-forces, so was able to interact and communicate with the group in a way they understood.

**“He brought the hawks down...it may sound daft, but a lot of us have seen some pretty nasty things in our lives and touching this hawk really gave us a lift. It landed on my arm and I was looking into its eyes and I thought I want to be a bird, I want to feel and see what it does – I got totally lost in the experience.**

**Before I joined Change Steps I spent a lot of time shut away in the house – the Change Step programme has bring me out of that, but the bushcraft took it a step forward – I can’t thank them enough for the experience. I’d really like the stay the night next time and do some survival training. We are really close friends now – and I don’t think we would be as close without Come Outside – it’s gelled us together and we look after each other.”**

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