



THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A UNIVERSITY CALM ROOM – A CASE STUDY

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BACKGROUND

STUDENT MENTAL WELL-BEING

Disclosure of mental health problems to institutions is on the rise year on year in the university student population. In 2016-17, 8,040 postgraduate students and 49,265 undergraduate students disclosed a mental health problem to their institution. This is in contrast to 2007-8 when the figures were 1,260 and 8,415 respectively (Universities UK, 2018a).

Mental health features frequently in the media and mental health issues in young adults, especially university students, has been highlighted in previous studies (Milojevich & Lukowski, 2016; Saleh et al., 2017). Poor mental health status can be reflected in students reporting sleeping problems (Petrov et al., 2014; Milojevich et al., 2016), depression (Ibrahim et al., 2013) and other related health issues. It is known that undergraduate students have to face a number of new situations and experience a high level of stress academically due to coursework, assessments, time pressures, debt and uncertainty (Cooke et al, 2006; Walsh et al., 2010).

SUPPORT PROVIDED

At the university we have a fully operational and integrated Counselling and Mental Health Service, offering one-one sessions for students in need. Sometimes counselling is not always necessary and providing time and space to process thoughts may be all that is required. A sensory room can provide a calming experience. It can provide a safe space, an area for relaxation, focusing on the senses such as vision and sound. MyQoI™ developed the technology to offer a sensory experience via a mobile tablet interface. A mobile sensory room (Calm Room) was created at the University of Bradford in conjunction with equipment supplied by MyQoL™ in the academic year 2019-20. The room was available on a drop in basis to any member of the university community and in particular, students.

Within the Counselling Service at the university, a room was identified which was quiet and peaceful. The room was furnished with comfortable chairs, bean bags; it had calming pastel walls, screens and indoor plants to create a physical environment conducive to relaxation. From a projector, an interchangeable image was selected from the MyQoI™ mobile tablet. This was projected onto the walls to create an image which filled the room, giving the impression of being immersed in the scene e.g. a forest waterfall, the sea, a wheat field. Calming sounds e.g. birdsong, gentle music or a crackling fire filled the room to encompass the senses of sound and vision together.

RESULTS

DATA ANALYSIS

From October -December 2019 a significant number of staff and students used the Calm Room. We received feedback forms in which we asked users to rate their stress level on entry to and exit from the Calm Room. Unfortunately, not everyone who used the room completed a form, although they were encouraged to do so. These results therefore under-represent the number who used the Calm Room.

In total there were 23 subjects who recorded stress levels before and after taking time out in the Calm Room. The results show that on a scale of 0-10 where 0 = no stress and 10 = maximum stress possible, stress level reduced from a median of 7 (IQR= 5 to 7) to 2 (IQR= 1 to 4) shown in Figure 1. A Wilcoxon signed rank sum test showed the difference to be statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). All the individuals who used the Calm Room felt less stressed as they left.

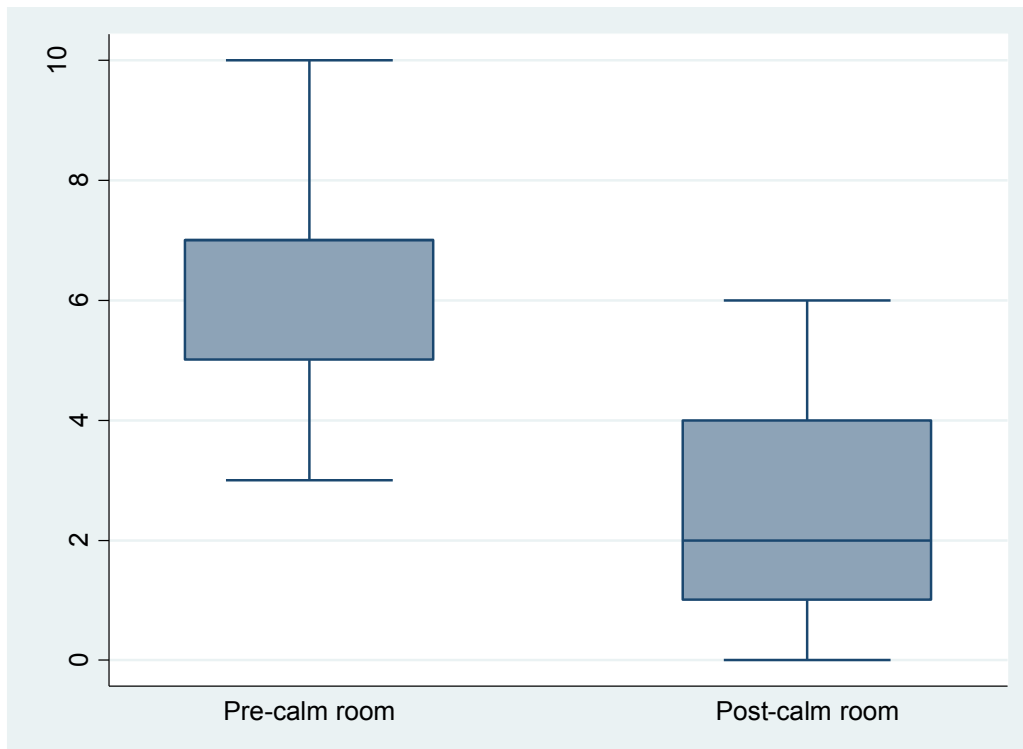


Figure 1: Stress levels pre and post Calm Room.

INDIVIDUAL SERVICE USER COMMENTS

Individual verbatim comments received about the Calm Room on the feedback forms included the following:

“Each time, I enter the Calm Room, it’s something different. Today it’s the waves. I enjoyed this as it symbolised cleansing the soul, purity and the sound is surprisingly relaxing too. Thank you! 😊”

“Liked the fire and also like the flowers and water scenes.”

“Enjoyed the fire scenery and sound (did not expect this). Destroying the old, unwanted stuff. Burning the past..... Thank you so much!”

“After my drop in with, I practiced breathing exercises recommended here, changed the sound and image to my liking. I enjoyed the warm sunrise with the slow river. This is because I enjoy the feeling of drifting away. Feels like my problems are flowing away from me. Warm colours made me feel warm, positive, there is still good in life. Got yourself a regular client now 😊”

“..... Nice and quiet area. No distractions and focus on the present.”

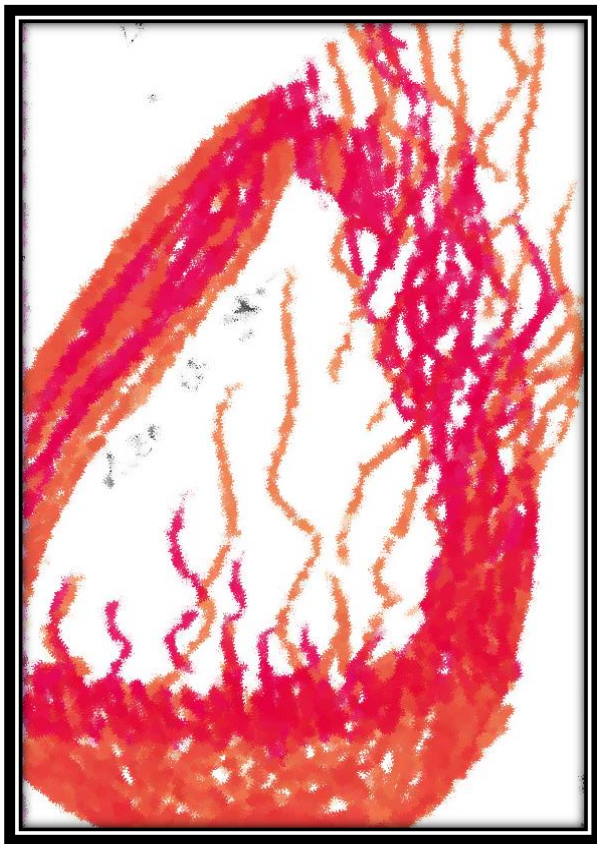
“Image= starry night, sunset, clouds drifting, diamonds, pandas but loved the sound and fish texture, pattern and imagery. Used beanbag as a pillow and made myself feel at home. Enjoyed it, peaceful and lovely.”

“Thank you for having this space. I really appreciate it and it helped to deal with my emotions on a difficult moment. Now I know I have a safe space to come when I want to feel calm.”

“If it was not for the Calm Room, right now, I’d be stressed to the max. It’s a good place to de-stress and relaxing too. Feel refreshed, THANK YOU 😊”

INDIVIDUAL SERVICE USER IMPACT

One Calm Room user created a beautiful drawing whilst using the Calm Room, when they were experiencing watching and listening to the crackling fire. In order to protect their identity, excerpts of the drawing and some of the wording included in the picture are detailed in figure 2 below.



“The past is over, I am free.” “Never give up ♥♥, I’m glad I didn’t.”

“The past is over, be mindful and focus on the present.”

“New beginnings, new love, new chapters, new blessings, new experiences, new lessons, new people, new day – a chance to become better.”

“Destroy your thoughts not yourself.” “Life is so beautiful and so are we.”

Figure 2: Drawing of a crackling fire and words by a Calm Room user.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Calm Room was straightforward and has been received very well at the university. From this very small sample of service users, benefits in stress reduction have been observed. From the data analysis, there was a significant reduction in perceived stress levels in all service users ($p < 0.001$). The verbatim comments from service users and the impact the Calm Room had upon one individual are very positive. They demonstrate the effects that the environment created by the MyQoL™ mobile tablet, can have in reducing perceived stress levels in a university community of students and staff.

Although used in all available sessions, there were variations in the use of the Calm Room. During university assessments, the use of the Calm Room increased and provided a space of peace and tranquility during what can be considered a turbulent time for students. Some students had a preference as to the scene and the sounds were played. The kittens were popular with some students whereas the sea, waterfall and the wheat fields were popular with others.

There is a plan to continue with the Calm Room initiative and expand the service, making it available at all times in the coming academic year 2020-21. We aim to work with service users to refine the service going forwards, to further meet the needs of our university community. In terms of further research, we plan to investigate various aspects of the use of the Calm Room including:

- i. establishing the most popular scenes and sounds with staff and students and their effects and;
- ii. using a validated outcome measure to establish the effects on various psychological conditions e.g. anxiety and depression.

The Calm Room has been deemed a great success and has been a welcome addition to the Counselling and Mental Health Service for the University community.

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