

Growing together:

supporting each other to grow
and flourish



The use of coaching approaches with the socially disadvantaged is not a new concept, but is not often described or discussed.

It is a pleasure to introduce you to June Webb, a member of our Coaching for Social Impact special interest group (SIG). June's commitment and activism, walking the talk as a coach and therapist, make her 'part of the solution' in addressing some of the challenges that exist in her local community

for those recovering from or coping with chronic mental distress.

June asks some powerful questions, born of her life experiences, training and her professional work, such as: How are coaching and the coaching approach relevant to the socially and economically disadvantaged? What does my community need? How might that need be met with the total involvement of the community at all stages? What part can I play in helping that to happen? Are some of

our terminologies outdated and disrespectful? June's questioning attitude has led her towards adopting the international clubhouse model as a way forward; a holistic approach focused on meeting the needs of communities, with their full involvement at the heart of the work and its organisation.

Val Watson

BACP Coaching Lead for the Coaching for Social Impact special interest group

Coach, former social worker and founder of the Norfolk Clubhouse **June Webb** explains how and why she was inspired to set up a community-run mental health support group

'There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives'
Audre Lorde

In 2017, I read a *Guardian* article titled 'Could life coaches ease pressure on overloaded social workers?'.¹ The question intrigued me. After graduating from Sussex University in 2008, I had worked at various settings on the south coast as a social worker with adults with various mental and physical needs. I wondered why, despite sometimes receiving intensive 'input' from various agencies, people did not seem to 'get better'. We saw them return time after time, following some intensive support, and then the service would reduce or close, only to see the person back again several days, weeks or months later.

In my first paid role as a social worker, a member of my team, who was originally from the US, explained that, back home, they had worked as a generic practitioner, long term, with the whole family. This approach to social work made me think, and we discussed the differences in approach between the US and UK. In comparison, our approach is fragmented and short term, so as not to 'create dependency', based on specialist areas, eg adults, mental health, learning difficulties etc. I wondered how we could work more holistically. Fragmentation inevitably means cracks. If people don't meet the criteria, are too ill, not ill enough, too old, too young, then no service exists or it is short term and temporary.

In her book *Radical Help*, designer and leading social thinker Hilary Cottam, outlines some successful relational welfare approaches. She comments on the process of commissioning and provision of services, noting that '...human connections that form around this exchange are invisible and have no place in the contract'.² The state's provision of 'care', thus monetised, becomes a mere transaction, and to me the term 'service user' sounds degrading. Seeking a more meaningful career, I left social work in 2014, moving to Norwich to train in counselling and psychotherapy at the University of East Anglia, including a postgraduate certificate in Focusing, followed by a master's degree in counselling. However, despite more open dialogue, I still experienced discussions around mental health as stigmatising. In 2019, I completed a certificate in coaching at the University of Cambridge. I wondered: could coaching offer a means for social change?

Breaking the mould

The traditional view of coaching is of a service that is provided for and accessed by business executives or, alternatively, life coaching for those seeking to improve their lives in some way. I have no problem with this; we all need to develop and grow personally. However, there seemed to be few opportunities for people who lack economic and social opportunities to access coaching. I started to research what others had done to 'break the mould' in offering provision outside the traditional 'life and executive coaching' models, such as Clare McGregor's *Coaching Behind Bars*, which documented the development of a special coaching programme for women in prison.³

As someone from a working-class, one-parent family, growing up in Sheffield in the 1960s, who left formal schooling at 12, following a series of personal traumas, I had few opportunities to access further education or meaningful work. I grasped what free resources I could, valuing my local library, a resource that built my confidence and provided hope that I could perhaps sit and pass exams one day. I read as much as I could and I took available correspondence courses.

A long-time local political and social activist, I have explored my privilege to some extent. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 spurred me on personally to become even more active in challenging social injustice and my own white privilege. The past couple of years have seen a drawing together of many strands in my life and work. In 2018, I began training from a systems perspective around relationships, then undertook further training in 2019 to 2021 with a placement at a local CAMHS team, completing an intermediate course in family systems therapy with the Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust.

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A systems approach

Systems approaches to change in coaching and psychotherapy are important on several levels. A systems approach promotes second-order change, which involves those being partnered developing self-agency, seeing themselves as active participants in their own lives, rather than passive receivers.⁴ This supports leadership creation beyond the traditional image of 'leader', and supports the growth of community leaders who are experts in their lived experience. The infamous 'revolving door', which many people experience in the care sector or mental health system, is challenged. For many, change is only possible if the 'experts' are involved: so-called first-order change.⁴ This approach actually creates dependency, because if we don't embody self-agency, we can't

face future difficulties with more resilience. The issue is not in relieving pressure on overloaded social workers or services, but in meeting people's unmet needs in such a way that it provides a route to lasting agency for everyone. This impacts beyond the individual and creates sustained change as it is embedded and embodied in people in community, not services or institutions.

This shift in responsibility is crucial. If people see themselves as having agency within a supportive, collective environment, they can then take responsibility to make change happen at every level. As a personal example of this, in 2017, I was offered the opportunity to complete some free business training in Norwich. I then won a place on a year's funded training with the School for Social Entrepreneurs.

The 'clubhouse' model

International Clubhouse originated in New York in 1944 as a small self-help group by some patients leaving hospital seeking to maintain connection, and is now a global network of over 320 clubhouses. The International Clubhouse model provides a systems approach, allowing all family members to be part of the community, thus impacting positively on the children, parents and older members of the family, and creates an eco-system within communities.⁵

Inspired by the International Clubhouse model, I set up Norfolk Clubhouse in June 2019, because it provides a model of positive mental health, run by a community of members, for the members. Membership is free to anyone over 18 and is a lifelong membership. The model is holistic, a counter-cultural force against the fragmented nature of much of the way health and social care are delivered. Change is embedded and embodied within members, who see themselves as active participants in running the clubhouse.

A 'garden mind'

Norfolk Clubhouse promotes a strengths-based approach to improving health that is non-stigmatising. In spring 2020, I devised an eight-week, online programme for members, called 'Growing Together', which drew upon my work with survivors of abuse, and my lifelong interests in nature and gardening, embodiedness and in using the non-stigmatising metaphor of growth. The model aligns with that of the garden mind by Dr Sue Goss,⁶ a systemic coach countering the 'machine mind' of monetised transactions underpinning much of what we experience in human dealings with work, relationships and our planet. The garden mind 'tends' rather than controls: these principles underpin our work.

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Members work through the course at their own pace, exploring the modules that pose questions to stimulate thinking around identifying strengths and growing resilience. Our facilitated weekly meet-ups, dedicated women's group and 'Saturday socials' on Zoom encourage members to share their interests, strengths, hopes and dreams and ideas for how we can support these to grow and flourish. It is based on an abundance model of identifying existing resources rather than a deficit model of disease and lack. This mindset focuses on what we can do, rather than what we think we can't do. We



don't ignore our mental, physical or environmental situation. We seek to work with it and to creatively transform it, together.

What makes Norfolk Clubhouse different? Our 'why' is in the 'unmet mental health needs', which existing services don't provide for. For so many people – despite the involvement of services and organisations – because services are providing the 'what' without exploring the 'why' of people's pain, it does not meet their real needs, or if so, only briefly. Relational welfare works with the root of the difficulties, not just the symptoms, because people's difficulties are embodied and embedded within the person, and they are also embodied and embedded within their relationships with themselves, their family, work, neighbourhood, school, town or city. They are often about being human in a very complex, post-industrialised world.

Many existing systems do not meet people's enduring needs for a sense of belonging or for sustained relationships beyond the merely functional or transactional. The difference is that our members are the 'skilled craftspeople', not the 'experts'.⁷ Members actively stitch, upcycle, restore, cherish and celebrate. Our 'how' is the principle of self-help, strengths-based and active community participation. Many of our members have reported that the clubhouse has been

there for them when other support has broken down, and we supported each other through the initial months of the pandemic online and by phone. Some of our members have gone so far as to say that, in some way, the COVID-19 outbreak has been a blessing, because it forced them to seek help; otherwise, they would not have discovered the clubhouse.

The pandemic has slowed our progress in embodied connecting, publicising our presence face to face and finding a base camp. However, we remain in contact via social media, phone and video link and are building creative partnerships with other charities, social enterprises and organisations in Norfolk, who are working for sustainable change. As the founder of a small organisation, I am a 'Jill of all trades' in setting up the necessary systems, doing the groundwork, fundraising, publicity, marketing and administrative tasks. Our team of volunteers – three trustees, two professional coaches, a chef and those tireless souls who create and maintain our website – are invaluable members of the team. It can be lonely and at times demoralising when funding bids are rejected and people don't 'get' us. We are finding creative ways to challenge this as we don't often tick the 'right' box, because we, like our members, are not box shaped! ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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