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Strengthening the Core Online Programme

Building the personal and collective resilience of voluntary sector leaders

Strengthening the Core is for leaders in the voluntary sector who would like to build their collective and personal resilience. The programme uses a unique blend of discussion and movement to build on existing self care, communication and emotional literacy skills, and improve people's ability to respond to difficult situations from a well resourced position.

The programme runs once a week for 2.5 hours over seven weeks, drawing on ideas and practices from yoga, embodiment, non-violence and self-care. It has been put together in response to the lived experience of both the developer/ facilitator, and many of her colleagues, friends, teachers and interviewees who have contributed to the project as a whole.

The 'core' here refers both to the way the voluntary sector can be the core of a community, and the way the leadership team of an organisation can provide essential support for service delivery. If they can remain vibrant, resilient and healthy, they can support their communities to flourish.

Each programme is tailored to participants' needs and interests, through an initial enquiry session. It brings together voluntary sector leaders to create a foundation of shared experience. For example, people may feel pressure to provide a seamless service for those on the front-line, and frustration at a lack of resources, or the need for systemic change. Others may find it difficult to prioritise their own self-care, as they understand so deeply the needs and concerns of the people using the charity's services. Over the long-term, these patterns can lead to exhaustion, stress or even burn-out.

The programme enables enquiry into such questions, as well as direct practical experience of the resilience-building tools of yoga, emotional literacy and self-care. It also makes space to explore collective resilience with a network of peers with similar interests.

What is the programme about?

Strengthening the Core is underpinned by the idea that our lives can be seen as a set of interconnected worlds; inner, interpersonal, social and natural. Each world contains many relationships, and the quality of these relationships can play a huge role in our resilience.

Embodied yoga practice builds awareness, increases range, and develops the ability to make choices. These three strengths (awareness, range and choice) are also useful when working with our emotions, and enriching communication skills, and are integrated throughout the programme.

Each session is divided between yoga and group discussion. There's a break in the middle, as well as options throughout to switch activities and to have screen breaks. The workshop section will include small group discussions as well as opportunities to journal, draw and reflect individually.



Each week covers a different theme, with themes weaving together over the course of the programme. Materials are drawn from teachings on yoga, meditation, non-violence and self-care, as well as the lived experience of the group, the facilitator and other voluntary sector leaders.

Session 1 Introductions, community-building and kindness

Session 2 Deep listening and gratitude

Session 3 Working constructively with anger

Session 4 Communication and conflict

Session 5 Power, boundaries and the high-quality no

Session 6 Creating resilience-enabling environments, personally and collectively

Session 7 Collective problem-solving, integration and next steps

Participants will be encouraged to try things out in between sessions, and to design personal and collective practices that can support them in the long term. There are also opportunities throughout the workshop for participant feedback, with flexibility built in so that the material can be adapted to the participants' priorities.

What are the intended outcomes?

- More experience of embodied movement and yoga, including meditation and breathing practices
- More skills and tools to work well with one's emotions
- An improved toolkit of communication skills for challenging situations
- Greater understanding and experience of self-care practices
- A plan for a sustainable personal practice
- Ideas for making groups and organisations more resilience-enabling



What do people say about the programme?

In 2019 the programme was piloted three times in different contexts, with feedback being gathered through observation, reflection, feedback forms and telephone interviews 2 – 3 months after the programme finished with the two larger pilot groups. The evaluation found:

The pilots were a success. The combination of yoga/movement and emotional self-development proved to be a much-needed combination. Participants viewed the yoga as something unique. It was empowering and playful. For some it was transformative, particularly those with underlying issues. The workshop led to a deeper understanding of needs, emotions and how to build communication skills to be better heard and understood, and, conversely, to better understand others.

Some participants experienced profound change as a result of the programme. All the others also experienced positive changes that had improved aspects of their life. The participants saw progress on all the intended programme outcomes, although to different degrees.

The full evaluation will be available in May 2020. Examples of participants' comments about the yoga practice:

'The yoga was a gentle and mindful movement – it's the most enjoyable form of yoga I have had.'

'When I was doing the sessions, I felt a deep sense of relaxation, this is unusual for me and it was into the next day too.'

And about what they learned:

'I guess it has changed my outlook on this stuff – on the need to give yourself time, to develop a relationship with yourself.'

'I've been chilling out a bit more.'

'I am more mindful of my response before I respond to something. I am more aware of what is happening when I respond so I don't respond immediately which is very helpful.'

'I am more aware of my own reaction to things, my own emotions and when I get fired up about things. It has given me some tools to be more honest with myself about what is going on'



'I just want to say that I found her, as a course convener and teacher, really lovely. I really appreciated her style of sharing and facilitation and yoga. I really appreciated her friendliness and generosity. For me, her presence and role in that course was probably a huge part of why I was drawn to go every week.' – programme participant

Workshop facilitator: Milla Gregor

Milla Gregor brings her lived experience and professional skills to the creation and delivery of this programme. She has spent her career in the voluntary sector, experiencing both the joy of the work, and its burnout-inducing challenges. She has been active since childhood on issues of the environment, social justice and conflict literacy, and as a befriender for older people and asylum seekers.

Milla has practised yoga for 20 years and is a certified yoga teacher (RYT 200) through Barefoot Body Training and is mentored by lead trainer Ashley MacDonald. She is particularly influenced by J Brown, Bo Henderson, Peter Blackaby, Theo Wildcroft, Matthew Remski and Frank Jude Boccio (all respected international yoga teacher trainers). Their diverse influences include T.K.V. Desikachar, Vanda Scaravelli and Uma Dinsmore-Tuli.

Milla has practised meditation for 15 years, in both the Vietnamese Zen and Insight traditions, and has attended over 30 retreats with diverse teachers including Thich Nhat Hanh, Martin Aylward, Martine Batchelor and Leigh Brasington. These teachers' influences include Vietnamese and Korean Zen Buddhism, and Thai Forest and Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism. Milla's main teacher is Martin Aylward and she is developing her own teaching practice, with his support.

Milla's non-violence work includes six years as a facilitator (and lead facilitator) for the Alternatives to Violence Project, and two years as a neighbourhood mediator with Common Ground. She has spent over 15 years as a trainer and facilitator supporting voluntary organisations to grow and change, and is currently undertaking the 8-month long Embodied Facilitator Course with Mark Walsh of Integration Training. Her professional training and experience includes:

Yoga

- 10 month 200-hour Yoga Teacher Training with Barefoot Body Coaching (July 2019), registered with the Yoga Alliance (RYT 200)
- Practice intensives with J Brown (2018 and 2019), Bo Henderson (2018) and Sarah Powers (2017)

Group facilitation and counselling skills

- Year-long Diploma in Facilitation Counselling Skills and Conflict Resolution, from NAOS (developed for Forgiveness Project prison facilitators) (2015)

Conflict literacy

- Alternatives to Violence Project Lead Facilitator training (2014)
- Alternatives to Violence Project Facilitator Training and apprenticeship (2012-14)
- Over six years as an Alternatives to Violence Project Facilitator, sharing 2.5 day experiential and therapeutic workshops in prisons and the community for people facing violence in their lives
- Restorative Justice Facilitation training with Common Ground (2012)
- Narrative Mediation training with Common Ground (2011)
- Two years as a Community Mediator, supporting people in conflict to find ways forward, together



Milla Gregor

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