

Life & Times

Mindful maps:

a reading group for GPs and psychiatrists

A PEER SUPPORT GROUP BEHIND THE BOOK COVERS?

When I moved to Liverpool from the North East a key priority was to join a book group. I had been a member of the same book group in Middlesbrough for the last 19 years, joining a newly formed group that had its genesis in the school playground and mother and baby group. We were a loyal group of readers who weathered the storms of life together and saw two friends emigrate to Australia, with one return!

Replacing such valued social support was always going to be a tall order, and despite numerous forays I failed to find the book group of my dreams.

At the same time, plunging into general practice after a period as a portfolio academic GP revealed a new terrain. Understanding local care pathways and getting to know who were the professionals behind the service delivery, especially in mental health, became important, but the luxury of time to meet colleagues was missing.

The need to establish supportive professional relationships was pressing and, coupled with a lifelong love of reading and discussing books, I found myself moving down a certain path, inspired by a wise tutor on a CPD residential course run by the regional postgraduate deanery.

Once the idea had taken shape in my head, there followed a journey starting with linking up with a local psychiatrist and former GP, and talking with colleagues about who the new recruits might be, from within our local networks of GPs and psychiatrists.

Interest was variable, with some doctors admitting to being too overwhelmed at the thought of reading a chosen book every 6 weeks; others saw parallels with a Balint group and were keen to join.

In November 2017 the reading group was launched with meetings booked at 6-weekly intervals held at each other's

homes, with generous servings of cake and hot drinks. We decided to keep the group exclusively female to promote a sense of sorority and shared experience.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE BENEFITS?

From the beginning, the sense of cultivating a powerful social connection combined with warm peer support was palpable. Unwittingly we had addressed a key need in tackling professional burnout.¹ Chronic stress in a pressurised work environment leads to disengagement, cynicism, and impoverished relationships.² In creating our own reading group we were unknowingly enhancing our resources to 'survive (and even enjoy) medicine'.³

As GPs and psychiatrists we all experience professional isolation owing to the nature of our consultation-based work. Being able to share stories in a convivial, supportive environment has rekindled a vigour in our clinical lives through fostering a greater sense of meaning and was an unexpected benefit. It has reduced our individual feelings of professional loneliness.

The fact that we are all working in disciplines experiencing severe recruitment challenges, with jobs often demanding high levels of emotional labour, can bring a lightening of the load. This is underpinned by a sense of shared solidarity of working in the beleaguered NHS, breaking down the divisive 'us and them' dynamic that is very draining.

The books we have chosen to date have stimulated our imaginations and curiosity to learn, as well as provoking debate and challenge. We alternate between fiction and non-fiction, and include titles such as *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande, *Saving Normal: An Insider's Revolt Against Out-of-Control Psychiatric Diagnosis, DSM-5, Big Pharma, and the Medicalization of Ordinary Life* by Allen Frances, and *His Bloody Project* by Graeme Macrae Burnet.

Our discussions are always thought-

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provoking, often take us into uncharted waters, and leave us invigorated with a hunger to read more.

There are advantages and disadvantages to forming reading groups that are professionally exclusive. However, given everyone's golden quest to seek a better work-life balance, joining a reading group of women doctors has been a 'win-win', with the group providing a safe and supportive environment to discuss literature, which nurtures both our personal and professional development.

We recommend it heartily and remind fellow bibliophiles that you can also include the experience and reflections of a reading group in your appraisal.

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<https://conversationsaboutwellness.wordpress.com>

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