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Organisation: **Bright Light Relationship Counselling**
Date of Award: **2017, 2018 and 2020**
Amount of Award: **£64,161**
Project Name: **Families in Recovery**



Bright Light provides a safe confidential space where people can open-up to help identify issues/challenges affecting them, and to talk through what needs to happen to improve their relationships.

Children and young people often have anger, guilt, fear, and/or mental health issues because of growing up in a family where there has been alcohol dependence and there is a need for the whole family to adapt to life without the addiction. Family therapy includes resolving some very difficult incidents caused by alcohol addiction, moving blame from the parent and to the addiction instead, gaining some insight into addiction, re-establishing healthy patterns of communication and roles within the family.

Families in Recovery: The Pilot Phase

In 2017 Couple Counselling Lothian, as it was known at the time before re-branding, received a grant of £18,000 from The Scotch Whisky Action Fund (SWAF) to help pilot a new counselling and family therapy project, 'Families in Recovery'. The grant contributed to the counsellor costs and associated travel expenses, external supervision to meet COSCA (Counselling and Psychotherapy in Scotland) regulations, and line management to enable the organisation to provide quality counselling to children and young people struggling to adjust to living with a former alcoholic, but now sober, parent.

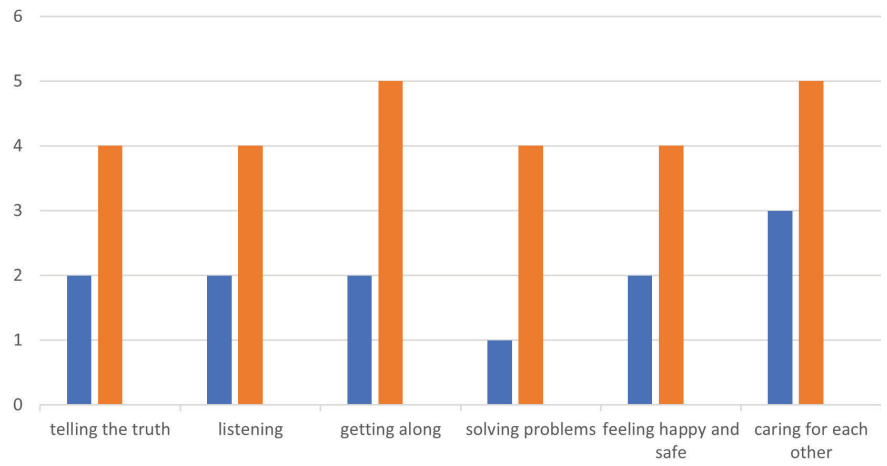
The Families in Recovery project provided counselling to thirty-eight children and young people under the age of eighteen struggling to adjust to living with a parent now recovered from an alcohol addiction. The project was set up to meet an identified local gap to work through issues and build bridges within the family. Referrals came from families themselves who had spotted a leaflet and phoned in, from the Sunflower Garden, Social services, Castle Craig, inpatient private recovery service and LEAP, the inpatient NHS recovery service.

The project was designed to deliver the following outcomes: Children and young people will have significant and lasting improvements in family relationships creating stronger 'families' around them:

- Improved communication with less secrecy
- Increased listening, understanding and empathy
- An ability to support and comfort each other
- Reduced conflict and acrimony
- Increased ability to problem solve together
- Increased feelings of happiness and safety



Family Relationship Outcomes



Families were asked to rate themselves across six categories at the start and end of the therapy using a scale of 0-5.

The graph shows the overall average of the results, with before in blue and after in orange, and is clear the significant benefit the therapy sessions had on the families.

Other outcomes included:

1. Children and young people will be more able to develop positive relationships with others
2. All participants will have increased awareness of dangers of alcohol abuse and its impact on family life.
3. It is anticipated that these outcomes will continue beyond the life of the project as capacity is built within people so that they are better able to keep safe, are more resilient and better able to cope with life's challenges without needing a whole range of other support/intervention.

Activities with younger children included drawing family trees where children would place objects on to represent family members. This technique helped families to open-up, discuss relationships and identify behaviour patterns. Often this highlighted other issues going on that impacted on the alcohol addiction.

Another technique involved using puppets as a way for the children to express themselves. This helped play out some of their relationship difficulties and to talk about difficulties from a more removed position which is often easier. The pilot project was a success delivering 141 family sessions in total. This unique support helped 10 families, during a nine-month period, made up of 38 individuals and children aged between 3-18 years old.



CASE STUDY: June and David have three children and are separated. June is in recovery from alcohol addiction and as a result all children live with David. The Families in Recovery sessions were set up to help support co-parenting. At the start their relationship was acrimonious and there were high levels of conflict.

The three children attended sessions on their own so they could talk openly about their emotions and their worries as well as gaining a better understanding of the addiction and recovery. This was especially helpful in addressing the shame they felt with peers.

Over the course of the sessions their communication improved, both parents seemed more confident, and they can now negotiate around their parenting without getting into arguments with greater empathy and less blame towards each other.

Families in Recovery: Post Pilot

During the pilot phase all participating family members fully engaged with the therapy team and were completely invested in the transition valuing the therapy support to heal relationships and find new and supportive ways of being with each other. This high engagement, positive post evaluation scores, and the outcomes achieved, evidenced the need and demand for the project to continue. This resulted in Bright Light securing a further £23,800 in 2019 from SWAF to continue the momentum of the work delivered during the pilot.

The first few months of the pilot required Bright Light to raise its profile and that of the new project, and network with key potential referring bodies (addictions team, children and family services, GPS and Health Visitors, Social Justice, other third sector agencies). This lead in time meant they could only offer therapy sessions for nine months rather than the full twelve months of the funding period, and eight of the ten families from the pilot phase were identified as still requiring support. A second year of funding meant the project could continue the sessions for another three months with those eight families, in addition to offering the twelve new families on the waiting list twelve months of therapy.

As well as increasing demand from clients/families, Bright Light also had increased demand from agencies to train and supervise their staff in systemic family therapy and to share its learning with them.

Unfortunately, towards the end of the second year of funding the pandemic hit in March 2020. All services had to move immediately from face to face to online in the February, before the official lockdown, as a client who was a positive case came in to the building and key staff became ill shortly after.

Moving the therapy sessions online was an enormous challenge for everyone involved including the families and staff. Bright Light wanted to ensure there was no break in support as they are working with some of the most vulnerable families even before COVID further exacerbated their existing issues. Zoom accounts were set up straight away and phone support was provided while helping families to adapt to the technology.

Despite all the challenges of COVID and lockdowns, Bright Light supported eighteen families (77 individuals) in its second year of funding, an increase from the ten (38 individuals) during the pilot phase.

CASE STUDY: Arthur (8) and Rueben's (11) father died in July because of long-term alcohol addiction which was also the cause of their parents separation the year before his death.

Juniper (Mum) asked to come for family therapy sessions to help support the boys with their grief. She was very worried her own complicated grief which includes a lot of anger towards their father would be damaging to the boys and she wanted to make sure they could all be supported in the best way possible.

During sessions, with all three attending, a range of activities were planned to help them talk about emotions, about families, and about death. They drew a huge family tree and the boys explored lots of stories of their family, looking at all the different people and relationships within it.

Due to the addiction, there was a lot of conflict and fall out which has been hard for the boys to make sense of. The boys and their mum have been creating their story about daddy's death and where he is now. Both boys like the idea that daddy is somewhere nice like heaven and they can still talk to him when they want. Rueben also likes the idea that daddy has reincarnated into an animal.

The sessions have included playful, and child focussed ways of talking about very serious and emotional events. The boys have been able to seek comfort from their mum in sessions and she has been able to respond in a more positive way. The sessions helped to reduce the mum's feelings of anger towards the boys' father as she is being supported to see what he means to them through their eyes. The boys have also been supported to ask mum questions and this has helped them make sense of some of the more frightening events related to alcohol that had been unspoken about, for example daddy breaking things and the police being called and daddy falling asleep and not putting them to bed when he was looking after them.

Juniper has been helping the boys in sessions to understand addiction is an illness and any of the behaviour associated was not daddy's intention to harm or frighten them. This is a big step for Juniper who had been blaming her ex-husband for his behaviour and his alcohol dependence.

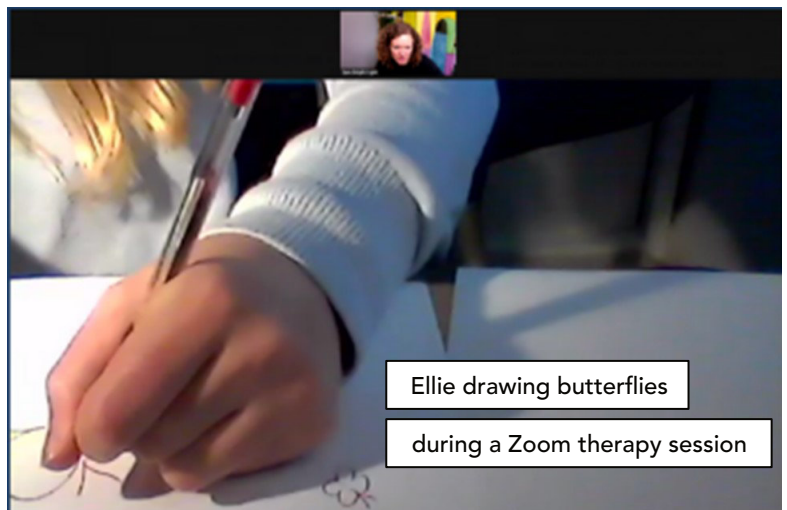
The boys and Juniper are arranging some rituals to remember dad and are also bringing photos to their next session to help talk about good times with him.

Final year of funding

The Families in Recovery Project continued throughout 2020/2021 as did the challenges of the pandemic. Bright Light were able to continue to evidence the need for the project to be supported for a third and final year from SWAF and a grant of £22,361 was awarded in 2020. By the end of April 2021 Bright Light had supported a further twenty-four families (72 individuals).

Delivering therapy sessions remotely was a very new concept and therapists worried about not feeling the same connection with clients and how to manage strong emotions in online sessions. However, families adapted and found positives in accessibility finding it easier to attend sessions with very few cancellations, or missed appointments, as a result. Family members who weren't geographically close were able to now attend, and so expanding the supportive network around people. Separated parents or family members who were not seeing each other could join sessions from separate locations, providing some safety and distance while being able to speak together. The technology also allowed therapists to be creative in sessions, with some family members turning their videos off and listening, while others stayed on and talked.

Working with children was the biggest challenge and Bright Light are still trying new ways to do this. Children often had better knowledge of the technology and enjoyed teaching others new techniques such as drawing on the zoom white board or sharing photos and pictures on their screens. Therapists were able to still use drawing as a medium and children enjoyed finding favourite toys to show them or other objects of importance from their homes.



CASE STUDY: Stephen (Dad) had developed an alcohol addiction after recovering from a serious brush with cancer. Rose (Mum) and Stephen had separated because of his drinking and Rose was angry with him and reluctant for the children to see him. Both children were upset, missing their dad, worried about their mum and Ellie (11) was often refusing to go to school.

Bright Light met the family just before lockdown and had two sessions with Rose and the kids and an individual session with Stephen. Once lockdown started in March phone support was set up for Rose while staff helped her to get set up with zoom. Once Zoom was set up therapy sessions were organised with Rose and the children, Ellie and Josh (9).

Over the course of sessions, they explored the close and loving relationships the children had with their dad and they spoke a lot about how good a dad he was. The kids shared photos on their screen to help them to talk about their times as a family and times spent with their dad. Rose was encouraged to hear these stories and it gave her some confidence to remember Stephen's abilities.

The children also described times when Dad had been drinking and staff supported them to talk about these experiences and their feelings of confusion and fear. Mum and the children also opened up about how frightened they had been when dad was ill with cancer, and this was something new and healing for them to share with each other. They talked openly about risk with all family members in a way that was non blaming or judgemental but ensured they were all working with the children's safety as a priority.

Individual therapy sessions were set up with Stephen to support his recovery and help him make sense of the traumatic experience of his cancer that had led to his addiction. Stephen found it easier not to drink in lockdown as he drank in pubs and therefore the children were able to spend some good and safe times with him, and Rose regained trust in his parenting.

The family ended sessions feeling better able to communicate around their problems with each other and be honest about the risks and need to ensure the children's wellbeing if Stephen was drinking again. Stephen was able to see himself as a good dad again which also supported his motivation for ongoing recovery.

The future of Families in Recovery

Bright Light received a total investment of £64,161 from SWAF benefitting 187 individuals over three years. As a result of this investment, Bright Light have secured a five-year grant from the Robertson Trust to continue the Families in Recovery project until at least 2026. This would not have been possible if the pilot project wasn't supported five years ago in 2017, and now it has secured the funding to allow it to run for what will be nearly ten years by the end of the Robertson Trust grant.

Family therapy sessions will continue to be provided to families who have been impacted by alcohol addiction and will no longer be a separate specialist project, distinct from the other family therapy work of Bright Light. They have learned through this project the issues for these families are well met by this style of therapy and there are similarities in all its other work. The links made with services supporting addiction have been valuable and they will continue to keep up to date with developments to ensure they are offering the best support to families and can link them with appropriate services as needed. As a team, they will also keep up their professional knowledge in this area through regular CPD and linking with other family therapists in addiction services.

Bright Light have built up a good reputation and become known to external services and families. Connecting with service providers in alcohol addiction had been an important task in the first instance and by the final year it had a small steady stream of self-referrals from families, Castle Craig Hospital, social services, and schools. None of these families had used the service before the funding from the Scotch Whisky Action Fund.

**all names have been changed throughout this report to protect the identities of the individuals and their families*



The SWAF funding has enabled us to see families from a whole spectrum of economic diversity, from families who have very significant economic and social challenges to those who are economically more comfortable. For those families who are less financially stable we have been enabled to offer the service for free or a minimum contribution.



Julie Hogg-Weld

CEO of Bright Light

"This has helped us to problem solve together"

"Thank you, it is clear the girls (9 & 13) are getting so much from these sessions"

"It has been very helpful to be able to talk in a safe space. I believe it has helped us all to open up more and see that we all care and want what is best for each other"

"You've given me back my confidence as a mother"

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