



Reading Matters

A new resource for
social prescribers

From
Improving Me

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Words: Jo Ward Changemaker
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Introduction

A blueprint for wellbeing

Improving Me, NHS Cheshire and Merseyside's women's health and maternity programme, adopted a health creation policy through a dedicated creative health work stream back in 2014 to promote wellbeing throughout the life course.

This work focused on understanding and demonstrating the many advantages of addressing the wider determinants of health and the range of benefits accruing from the development of novel non-clinical interventions, by harnessing the arts and culture for women and children's wellbeing.

Building on the [Creative Health Inquiry](#), Improving Me launched a [Social Prescribing Concordat for Creative Health](#) as part of NHS70 celebrations and then commissioned the Women and Children's Creative Health Handbook: [Wellbeing by Design](#) to bring together key case studies and resources to support wider awareness, understanding and adoption.

Given 79% of the NHS workforce and 84% of the social care workforce are women, it wasn't a surprise to learn from the 2022 NHS England survey of social prescribers that 85% of this workforce are also women.

It also didn't take much of a stretch to start to consider how these creative non-clinical interventions could impact positively on the healthcare workforce as well as their patients, after all, everyone is a patient at some point in their lives.

This occasional paper reflects Improving Me's commitment to creative health and highlights the role and value placed on social prescribing, so what better way to mark International Social Prescribing Day than producing an introductory resource on the place of creative health in supporting link worker wellbeing, and all women's health and wellbeing.

Context is everything

It is important to add at this juncture, as a dedicated programme for women's health, our focus was and is about addressing key priorities related to women's health and maternity journeys.

Most notably we are concerned with those many and multi-faceted factors that contribute to what can only be described as a major public health concern reflected in a perinatal mental health crisis and the persistent disparity in maternal mortality rates between women from Black and Asian ethnic groups and White women. We are therefore committed to addressing the enduring ethnic disadvantage and deep and systemic racism that fuels this.

We currently face an **unprecedented six-fold increase in maternal suicide** as well as being confronted by demonstrable links between poverty and increases in both **infant mortality** and numbers of preterm births.

What is equally clear from the local and national data and the hugely important **MBRRACE-UK** reports is that the NHS cannot ever hope to achieve any reduction in these deaths without addressing the wider determinants of health and the multiple disadvantages that so many women face. This is why social prescribing is so important, particularly in light of the **Core 20 Plus 5 agenda**.

Like Improving Me, social prescribing is concerned with promoting health creation and not just disease management. After all, health is not just the absence of disease. It should be about the promotion of wellness and wellbeing.

The **Health Creation Alliance** states:



Health Creation is the process through which individuals and communities gain a sense of purpose, hope, mastery and control over their own lives and immediate environment; when this happens their health and wellbeing is enhanced.

Link workers are on the frontline addressing health inequalities, seeing and feeling adversity on a daily basis. They work with people throughout their life course addressing unjust and avoidable differences in people's health across the population and between specific population groups.

This is why we feel it is equally important to address this key workforce's wellbeing needs and use the learning to infect the wider health workforce.

Ultimately, this is why we decided to dedicate this resource to link worker wellbeing.

Harnessing creativity and community

Improving Me believes social prescribing (the whole range of interventions) is an untapped resource for those of us working in healthcare more generally too, and the benefits of social prescribing as a way of working are often untold.

The most effective social prescribing pro-actively cultivates relationships and partnerships with local voluntary services, housing associations and other community organisations such as libraries and museums. This asset-based working is a key aspect of integrated care, connecting people to a wealth of community resources – or assets.

Asset-based approaches enshrined in social prescribing proactive outreach and articulated through co-production is a means to enhance people's health and wellbeing and promote their resilience and independence.

The range of assets include community relationships and social networks, community and neighbourhood services, the plethora of community clubs, or societies and facilities, and the skills, imagination and knowledge held by people.

This particular publication has therefore chosen to focus on what we see as a pivotal community resource: our libraries, their staff and audiences and their collections.

For a young Billy Connolly, the library was his salvation. [Read all about it here](#), where Billy discusses his love of literature and how it has accompanied him through his adult life.



Going to the library changed my life. It may even have saved it.

Billy Connolly

Women's voices – words matter

Improving Me is currently developing a women's health strategy for Cheshire and Merseyside which embraces social prescribing and creative health opportunity as we move toward the NHS75 in July this year.

The first ever national Women's Health Strategy for England was released in August 2022. Of the 110,000 respondents, 84% said women's voices are not listened to. Our own women also say they sometimes find it difficult to find the right words and confidence to speak out. Hence, Improving Me has been exploring how women can develop their voices and be heard.

Our creative health interventions have been key to this work as has our work with libraries. The **Holding Time** and the **Lullaby Project** are great examples of how creative health interventions can give the women they engage with both a voice and a platform.

Working with libraries, we are implementing a set of practical steps to improve all women's health. As a core community partner, libraries are helping us to gather women together and amplify women's voices, and as a key community asset women are helping shape and deliver the women's health strategy itself. We believe libraries are a vital resource in communities, and their collections are powerful tools to drive health creation and support community connections. So, we have been exploring how reading and writing (in all its forms) can help women develop a voice.

During this process we also discovered a whole range of other library assets all too often hidden, that support the work of the social prescribing workforce in managing their own

wellbeing and workload, which facilitate self-development and promote and enhance self-health, as well as the health of their patients.

Social Prescribing Day provides a great opportunity to raise awareness of new creative health resources and opportunities in libraries which can support both workforce and public wellbeing.

A workforce who has had direct experience of the benefits of social prescribing are our future champions. And the beauty of social prescribing is that it spans a prevention as well as treatment and management continuum, helping people stay well as well as supporting healing and recovery.

If it works for you it can work for patients too.

Reading is good for you

We realise that not everyone is convinced of the value of a creative health agenda and the opportunity presented by social prescribing. So, we have set about unpicking some of the evidence and laying bare why it works in the context of [Reading Well](#).

There is a lot of research which already demonstrates the positive links between reading and writing and wellbeing. This evidence includes the benefits of both fiction and non-fiction. In fact the latest research indicates that diving into a piece of fiction, and the impact of that page-turner, trumps non-fiction for wellbeing benefits.

But fiction or not, each genre brings a different set of resources to the table. Reading or accessing audio books, blogs or podcasts can all help as well as writing things down. What this tells us is that personal choice is key and there is no one size fits all.

We know when the world around us feels very complicated and sometimes overwhelming, we can find comfort in a story or a character we relate to. Following characters who may get in to scrapes, who find order or solutions to their own problems, gives us hope that the same may be possible for us too.

A favourite character can provide a mirror to ourselves or others. And a storyline may well help us gain an inside perspective as to where our own story is going too. It can provide us with the distance needed to reflect. Or it can also highlight our strengths and allow us to appreciate these more.

Reading fiction allows us to meet different characters that we share characteristics with, as well as to see the possible outcomes or endings to the story or stories we're living.

Likewise, non-fiction is helpful in sense making. It helps us find key information and facts to potentially solve a problem which may have previously felt insurmountable simply because of the gaps in the picture we find ourselves in.

Ways to wellbeing

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) 5 Ways to Wellbeing (2008) provides a useful framework to highlight how reading (and writing) benefits individuals and communities by supporting 5 everyday key actions we can all engage with.

We like the NEF approach because, rather than encouraging a completely novel set of behaviours, the end goal is to encourage and increase the time people spend in activities known to enhance wellbeing that in this case are also very accessible, low cost or no cost. We think Dr. Seuss was right when he wrote:



**The more that you read,
the more things you will
know. The more that you
learn, the more places
you'll go.**

Five ways to wellbeing

1. Connect

Getting lost in a go-to read can make it easier for us to relate to others. Literary fiction, most specifically, has the power to help readers understand what others are thinking and supports reading other people's emotions.

Having strong social relationships, a network of support and someone to turn to in a crisis is a powerful influencer of wellbeing. Just think about those favourite characters you may have come across in a good read or audio book.

Reading helps you build self-awareness, increases knowledge and confidence so you feel able to reach out as well as helping you understand others. In this way it can directly underpin the development of vital social networks, whilst promoting reflection, understanding and empathy which helps sustain these key relationships. These skills make good link workers.



Understanding others' mental states is a crucial skill that enables the complex social relationships that characterize human societies.

Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind
David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano

2. Be Active

There is an old saying - use it or lose it - which is as pertinent today as ever.

Reading and writing exercise the brain and help improve memory and focus. They also fuel knowledge and support new skills; whilst they can equally provide an important release and outlet for emotions. Being active both physically and mentally is really important to support personal growth and physical and mental health.

Remember, **there is no health without mental health.**

There is also something about traditional paper books which also appears to support deep immersive reading that is uniquely good at stimulating focus and concentration.

3. Take notice

Reading can pique curiosity and open-up new worlds to us all. In our busy often hectic daily lives, we often feel distracted, rarely take time to stop, or to pay attention to what is going on right now and really appreciate the world around us.

Taking time to focus on the 'here and now', within an often all too busy, frequently confusing and sometimes frightening world we live in, can support good mental health.

Losing yourself in a book can provide the space to take stock, slow down and relax as well as provide insights into other people's lives.

4. Keep Learning

We know reading enhances vocabulary and communication skills, but it also opens up new worlds you can explore.

Learn how it feels to be a civil rights activist in 1960s America, or what it takes to be an athlete at the top of their game. Books provide windows into the lives of others and improve personal understanding of different people and cultures. They teach practical skills like cookery and DIY. They support you in developing new interests, build confidence and empower you to change.

5. Give

There is an old saying, "It's better to give than receive", and it is backed up by research.

People who are kind and compassionate experience clear benefits to their wellbeing and happiness.

Sharing stories and using activity books helps us build social bonds with others, whether young or old. Giving time to read to others, recommending a book to a friend that you have enjoyed or found useful; these small acts of kindness and compassion provide benefits to personal happiness.

Helping others is thought to be one of the ways that people create, maintain and strengthen their social connections. Why not release a book into the wild with [BookCrossing](#), share your own creative work or support someone with their own project or volunteer at a shared reading group?

The resources

The beginning

Six public library services are working with Improving Me across the Liverpool City Region (LCR) to develop and test a model to harness libraries and their books for wellbeing. They are:

- Halton
- Knowsley
- Liverpool
- Sefton
- St Helens & the Wirral.

Library Light

These libraries are working together through a joint scheme called Library Light. Library Light will let you:

- Borrow and reserve up to six books from any neighbouring library services directly. Just remember to return them to the service you borrowed from
- Access PCs and printers at these services, but charges may apply for printing.

Uplifting resources for NHS staff

As an initial action, this collection is now available across all the 9 Library Light services. The collection was developed jointly by Health Education England and the Reading Agency who crowd-sourced a list of uplifting and mood boosting books and digital resources specifically for NHS staff.

Previously only held in NHS health libraries, this will extend access to primary care workforce, as well as the wider population. The aim is to encourage more awareness of the value of reading for wellbeing.

As a next step, the Library Light partnership and Improving Me is developing a bespoke list of recommended reading for women throughout their life course to support greater understanding of women's health issues.

Always remember health staff are patients too.

Watch this space...

NHS Knowledge and Library Hub

Need reliable evidence and knowledge for doing good?

NHS librarians and knowledge specialists work together to ensure NHS bodies, their staff, learners, patients and the public ‘use the right knowledge and evidence, at the right time, in the right place, enabling high quality decision-making, learning, research and innovation to achieve excellent healthcare and health improvement.’

This work helps connect the healthcare workforce and patients to high quality knowledge and evidence. The gateway to the resources is the [Knowledge & Library Hub](#). Expert support is available from your local [NHS knowledge and library service](#), which can support with searching, keeping you up to date in your field, training in [advanced searching and evaluating the evidence](#). They can also support you with any research, quality improvement projects to further spread the word about social prescribing.

All you need to begin is a [FREE OpenAthens account](#), which is available to all social prescribers and primary care colleagues. Use this to log into the Knowledge and Library Hub and to access any of the resources. To make it easier to access and request articles, download [LibKey Nomad](#) for your browser which will give you direct access wherever you search.

[See full eligibility criteria here.](#)

If you're new to literature searching, or need a refresher, why not try the e-learning course: [How to search the literature effectively](#).

The resources

- Includes all journal articles, e-books, guidelines and evidence summary tools provided nationally and by your local NHS library team
- Provides seamless access to full text, as an immediate download or on request from an NHS library
- Avoids the less-reliable sources you might find in a general web search.

The Knowledge and Library Hub has a specific focus on encouraging staff in primary care to access these services. Have a look at their video [here](#).

And finally, as part of a wider library and [Writewell Community](#) partnership we would encourage you to explore the benefits of writing too.

Again there is a significant evidence base to underpin this call to arms. Writing is one of the best tools for making sense of life. So why don't you try it out.

Writewell has made available a free journaling tool which you might like to try out [here](#).