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Walsall College: Promoting healthy lifestyles with young people

In January 2007, I started planning a project, based on the Government's Every Child Matters initiative, to promote healthy lifestyles amongst young people in education.

Initial discussions with several groups of 16-19 year old males, about promoting healthy lifestyles, revealed the project may encounter some resistance from the participants.

I received a clear message that they knew what was best for them – their lifestyles symbolised what they wanted out of life. It was important to have fun, exercise the power to spend money on their priorities and live for today. Taking care of one's well-being is something that has no relevance in their current lifestyle.

Project pilot

I piloted the project within the School of Engineering and worked with 44 students. My primary aim was to encourage learners to reflect on their current lifestyle and consider alternative choices to promote their well-being. I wanted to empower and motivate them to challenge existing lifestyle patterns sustained by media and peer pressure.

Topics were explored by the learners using a series of workshops and supportive strategies were developed for small lifestyles changes. Topics included nutrition, physical activity, drug abuse and stress management.

Activities were organised to provide opportunities for new experiences, including making and tasting smoothies, using pedometers while power walking, debating impact of local drug cultures and

undertaking relaxation exercises.

At the end of each session, learners devised an action plan to support one positive change to their lifestyle. The following session, action plans were reviewed and evaluated.

During a lively group discussion on nutritional self-assessment, one participant believing poultry to be a healthy option, acknowledged he ate fried chicken every day. The following week, whilst reviewing action plans, he admitted he had decided to go 'cold turkey'! and was amazed how easy it was to say 'no'.

Feedback

Feedback received from participants through evaluation forms and group discussions was very positive. Workshop resources and activities were developed for a wide range of learning styles and focused on being interactive, informative and challenging.

The project has now been extended across the college. Teaching resources are available for staff on the college's intranet site and additional training available. Future workshops to be developed will include sexual and mental health.

Overall I was surprised how quickly some participants' negative attitudes were replaced with a willingness to explore and consider alternative healthy options.

One of the more influential factors was using immediate health benefits. These benefits, which enhanced the student's body image, were used as goals rather than assurances of a long and healthy life and appeared to be great motivators.