



CASE STUDY:

Addressing substance misuse at
HMP Altcourse through digital innovation



We have had over 700 people start using Breaking Free Online over the past year at HMP Altcourse, and the feedback we are getting on the programme is phenomenal.

Our service users are engaging with a completely personalised digital substance misuse intervention which is helping them identify and put into practice ways to stop using drugs and alcohol. The gamification built into the programme increases their motivation and encourages them to keep them coming back for more.

Importantly, whilst building their recovery capital, service users are also learning valuable computer skills that promote digital inclusion, such as using a web browser, completing online assessments, printing documents, and working through the many interactive elements within the programme.

Breaking Free Online is also helping our SMS team to target and engage service users who are not entirely comfortable in conventional group sessions. This tailored digital

intervention enables them to focus and work on the specific issues that are problematic for them.

For those service users who unfortunately return to the prison sooner than we hoped, the programme allows them to pick up where they left off without having to wait for other forms of support to become available, which is a real help and comfort to them.

We have seen all age groups benefit from the digital recovery support provided by Breaking Free Online, including service users of over 60 years of age.

Communal spaces in prisons can be noisy and unruly, so seeing groups of up to 20 service users at a time sitting perfectly still, quiet and engaged with the programme on the tablet computers is genuinely a sight to behold.

Andy Kitts

Integrated Substance Misuse Service
Lead Manager, HMP Altcourse



Accredited Programme for substance misuse

Breaking Free from Substance Use (Justice) is an evidence-based digital behaviour change programme developed specifically to address substance misuse and associated mental health issues within prisons. It is an interactive, engaging and highly personalised programme that equips service users with an extensive toolkit of psychoeducation, positive coping skills and recovery resources. To cater to all literacy levels and different learning styles, it provides full voiceover on every screen. It is the only digital intervention to be accredited by CSAAP and approved by HMPPS as an Effective Regime Intervention; and is also endorsed by NICE.

Implementation of Breaking Free at HMP Altcourse

During the 12-month period from April 2018 to March 2019, HMP Altcourse, a Category B men's prison in Liverpool, had the highest rate of service users benefitting from and completing Breaking Free within the prison estate, with 724 accounts being activated (see Fig 1).

Account activations by service users

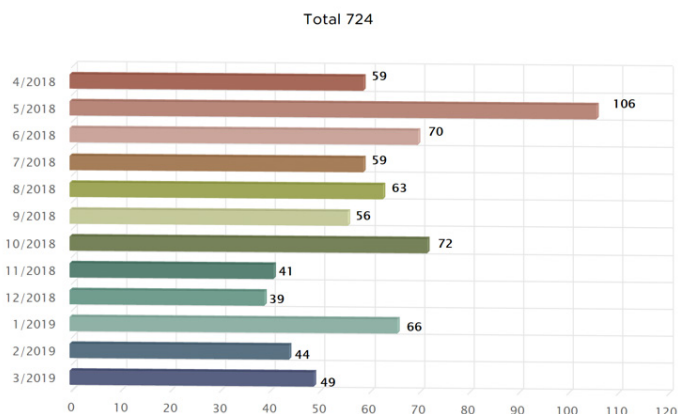


Fig 1: Number of Breaking Free accounts activated by service users at HMP Altcourse each month

The age profile of the Breaking Free users at HMP Altcourse showed a wide distribution, encompassing every age from 18 through to 65 and over (see Fig 2).

Age profile of service users

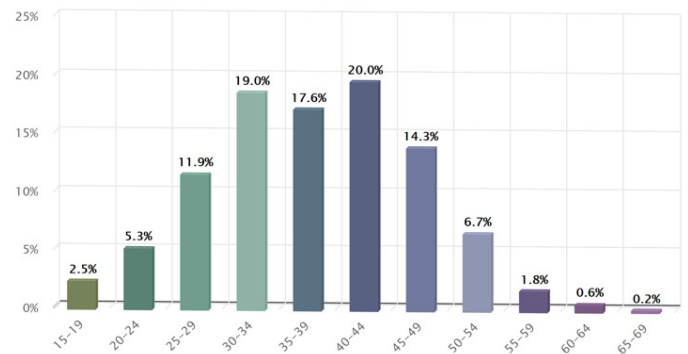


Fig 2: Age profile of Breaking Free users at HMP Altcourse

Factors contributing to adoption of Breaking Free

At HMP Altcourse, the high uptake of Breaking Free was driven by several factors:

Visibility was key in that the availability of the digital recovery support provided by Breaking Free was signalled clearly to service users. As well as seeing posters explaining the programme's benefits, their awareness was raised by group Breaking Free sessions taking place in an open dining area of the detoxification wing. Holding the group sessions in such an open space meant that service users who were not on the programme could see sessions being delivered, which stimulated their interest. This location also removed the logistical difficulties that can often restrict the movement of service users within prisons and disrupt their access to interventions.

Accessibility of Breaking Free within the prison was another major strength of the delivery model. Service users benefitted from an innovative approach which allowed them to access the programme on secure WiFi-enabled tablet computers. In addition, group Breaking Free sessions were implemented within the wing several times a week, meaning service users could access the programme when they needed it most:

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“As soon as I got on the course, it gives you something to do, a purpose, rather than just sitting on the wing.”

‘Dave’, Peer mentor

“It is a good help, it’s good to just spend an hour, an hour a day on it like you do ... it’s keeping all thoughts in the front of your head instead of the back of your head, like coping strategies.”

‘Steve’, Service user

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Peer mentors played an important role in helping to facilitate Breaking Free within the prison. Harnessing the lived experience of peer mentors in this way not only supported the Breaking Free users, but also helped to strengthen the peer mentors’ own recovery:

..... “ “

“It just reinforces the way you’re feeling. Sometimes relapse is a big problem when you’ve been on drugs for so long and temptations come and go, but the course actually reinforces some parts of that to help you forget about it and move forward and give you something positive.”

‘Dave’, Peer mentor

“You’ve got peer mentors ... you’re not sat there waiting, you’ve always got someone to make sure you’re doing the best things for your recovery.”

‘Mike’, Service user

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Personalised progress reports were generated by the Breaking Free programme, and service users were encouraged to share these with their family members, friends and significant others. The visually impactful reports reflected their progress in addressing their substance dependence, engaging with the behaviour change techniques taught by the programme, and acquiring recovery capital. Accompanied by certificates of achievement, these reports were sent to partners and relatives to demonstrate the work the service users were doing on their recovery and their commitment to change.



Case recording at the prison ensured that the Substance Misuse Service received due acknowledgment for delivering an Accredited Programme. This helped motivate staff to continue implementing Breaking Free and encouraging service users to engage with it.

Substance profile of Breaking Free users

Analysis of the treatment pathways selected by the Breaking Free users at HMP Altcourse revealed that half were using the programme to address problem drug use, while around a third were poly-users of alcohol and drugs, and a small minority were experiencing difficulties only with alcohol (see Fig 3).

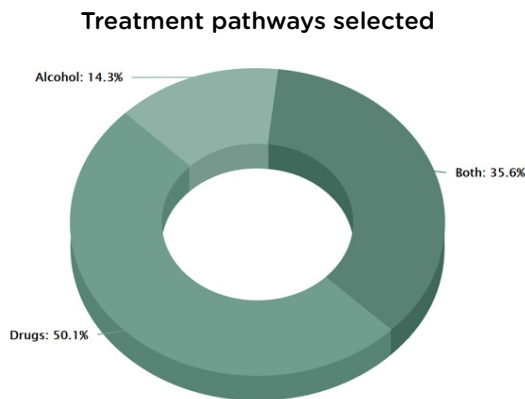


Fig 3: Treatment pathways selected by Breaking Free users at HMP Altcourse when activating their accounts

Around half of the cohort of service users who were tackling drug dependence with Breaking Free identified heroin as being their main problem substance, while another quarter identified crack. The primary focus of the remaining quarter was on a diverse range of other substances, with cocaine being the most significant of these (see Fig 4).

Drug profile: main problem substance

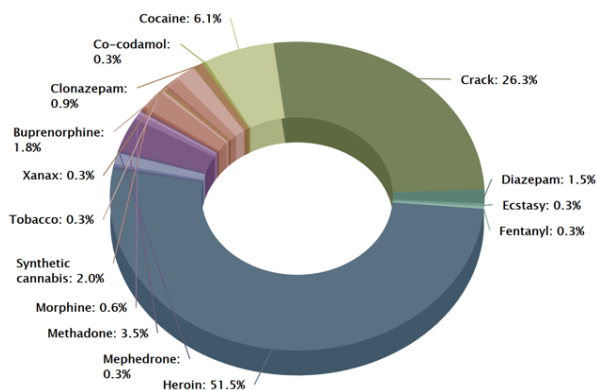
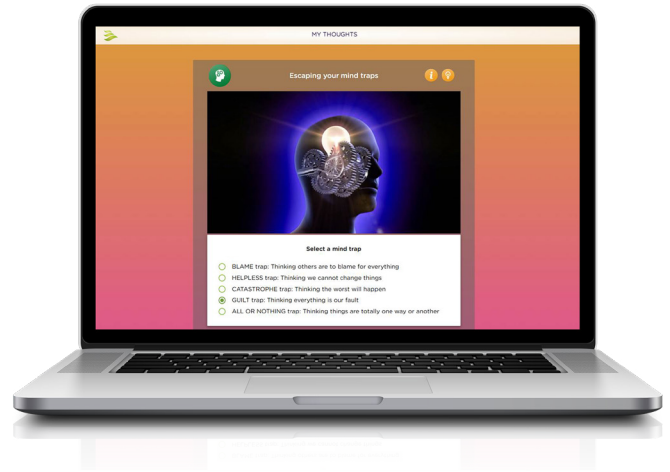


Fig 4: Main problem substance identified by those Breaking Free users at HMP Altcourse who were addressing drug dependence with the programme



Outcomes of Breaking Free users

During the 12-month period, 86.1% of the service users at HMP Altcourse successfully completed the Breaking Free programme. This high level of engagement resulted in very significant reductions in the use of alcohol, cocaine, crack, heroin, cannabis, prescribed medications, and new psychoactive substances (NPS), including synthetic cannabinoids, as well as marked reductions in the use of amphetamines and substitute medications (see Fig 5).

Reductions in substance use

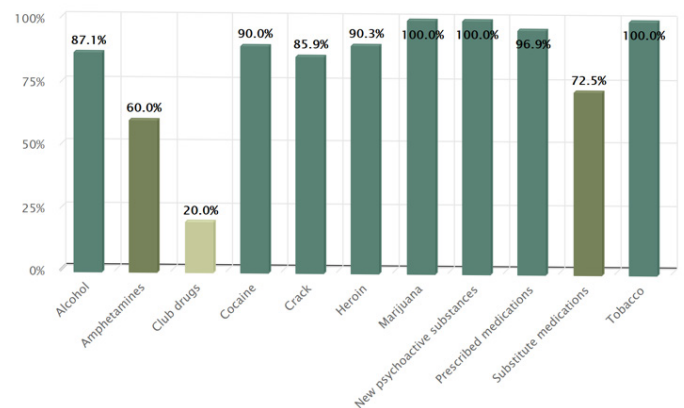


Fig 5: Average percentage reductions in consumption of their main problem substance by Breaking Free users at HMP Altcourse, shown by class of substance

In addition, the Breaking Free users showed very significant improvements across six domains of functioning that are targeted specifically by the programme since they are evidenced by research to be implicated in both substance use and

recovery from substance use. The gains they made in these areas suggested they had greatly enhanced their ability to anticipate high-risk situations which could trigger alcohol or drug use; maintain an appropriate thinking style; regulate difficult emotions such as anxiety and anger; manage cravings and urges; replace unhelpful behaviours with purposeful activities that increase structure in the daily routine and boost mood and self-esteem; and lead a healthy lifestyle – all of which are important protective factors against relapse and consequent reoffending (see Fig 6).

“I got a lot out of it at the end of the course, I’ve been drug free now for over twelve months.”

‘Dave’, Peer mentor

“You can be more honest on a computer than in a group, things you don’t want to say in a group that you can say on the computer.”

‘Mike’, Service user

Prison staff also commented about their perception of Breaking Free:

“I’ve been doing it from the start, since the very first time it started, and I’ve seen it does work, it does. It’s a safety net for them, their own personal counsellor.”

Gillian Daley, SMS Practitioner

Recovery progression

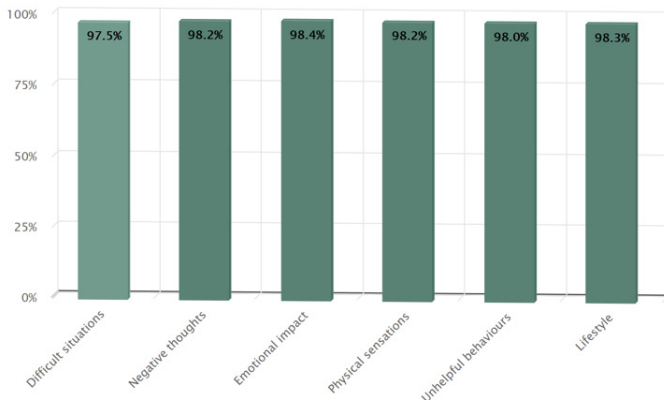


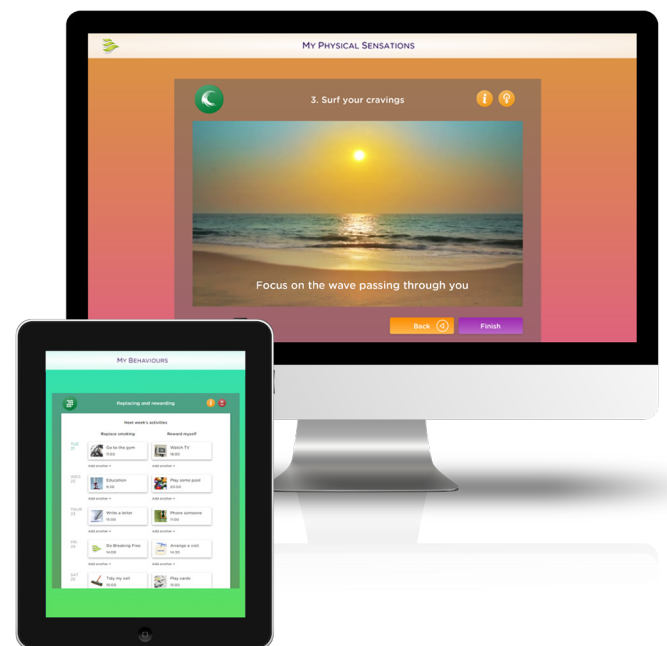
Fig 6: Average percentage improvements of Breaking Free users at HMP Altcourse in six key areas of functioning that contribute to recovery from substance dependence

Experiences of Breaking Free users and prison staff

Service users were asked about their experiences of Breaking Free at HMP Altcourse, to which they responded by explaining how they benefitted from the programme:

“For me it’s like coping strategies ... learning how to cope with different things, either inside or outside of prison, and different triggers that make me use drugs and things like that.”

‘Steve’, Service user



Key learnings from HMP Altcourse

The successful implementation of Breaking Free at HMP Altcourse suggests it is highly beneficial to:

Ensure the basics are in place, including a dedicated space to run Breaking Free sessions, good access to computers, laptops or tablets, and adequate internet connectivity.

Elicit the support of peer mentors, alongside staff, to help service users engage with the programme. As well as assisting staff during the group sessions, peer mentors can discuss and promote Breaking Free whilst on the wings and encourage service users to practise the new coping skills they have learnt between sessions on the computer.

Avoid pre-judging which service users will benefit most from using the programme, and encourage anyone struggling with alcohol or drug problems to try it.

“I’ll always say to the lads ‘just give it a go’, because you never know.

You can’t cherry pick, because the ones you don’t pick are the ones that will surprise you.”

Gillian Daley, SMS Practitioner

Use Breaking Free to plan for the first day and week of release. A key advantage of the digital programme is its ability to provide continuity of care ‘through the gate’. So, include information about Breaking Free in the service user’s release plan and ensure they are aware that they can continue accessing it via the internet when they return to the community.

The availability of this recovery support on demand 24/7 can play an important role in helping them to avoid relapse, overdose and returning to a substance-involved lifestyle, thereby reducing the risk of reoffending.

Breaking Free Group would like to thank the service users, peer mentors and staff at HMP Altcourse for assisting with this case study.

The names of the service users and peer mentors have been changed to ensure confidentiality.



For more information, please contact us:

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