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STRUCTURED EXERCISE PROVING A GAME CHANGER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE FIGHTING DRUG AND ALCOHOL ISSUES

An innovative, award-winning program delivered in partnership by Mission Australia, Next Step Drug and Alcohol Services, Thriving Inc and the University of Western Australia's School of Human Sciences, is using regular structured exercise as a vital step in assisting young people recovering from serious issues related to long term drug and alcohol misuse.

The Thriving-DAYS (Drug and Alcohol Youth Service) initiative, which is based at UWA's Exercise and Performance Centre, delivers a specifically tailored exercise program for young people between the ages of 12 and 21 who are engaged with the Drug and Alcohol Youth Service.

Those taking part in the program attend sessions at UWA two afternoons a week and perform individualised exercise programs based on participants' goals and health outcomes. At the same time are given information and education on the longer term benefits that physical activity can have on their overall health as they move into adulthood.

Mission Australia's Area Manager of Youth Services, Suzanne Caren, said that more than 100 clients from the organisation's DAYS program had participated in the program so far. "Our Thriving-DAYS participants have an average of three years prior substance misuse, so these are young people dealing with significant and often long term problems," she said. Delivered by accredited exercise physiologists and other exercise specialists, the aim is to encourage those attending to lead a more active lifestyle and to continue those healthy behaviours once they have transitioned out of residential treatment.

The program recorded an 87% satisfaction rate, with 96% of those who participated going on to take part in some form of exercise outside of the structured sessions. Thriving-DAYS was recognised earlier this year at the 2018 WA Alcohol and Other Drug Excellence Awards for the significant contribution it was making to preventing and reducing alcohol and drug harms in young people.

Ms Caren said that those participating in the Thriving-DAYS program reported that it had had a positive effect on their levels of drug and alcohol use, including helping them deal with cravings and in improving sleep, which she said is a significant issue for those undergoing detox and rehabilitation.

"The young people involved also provided positive feedback about general improvements in their self-esteem and mental health as well as their overall physical health," she said.

“Those taking part also reported an increased knowledge about exercise which would potentially break down some barriers to participation and make them more comfortable exercising regularly in a safe and more structured manner,” she added.

Ms Caren said that although many Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) programs incorporated some level of physical activity, the program was innovative because it was highly structured, goal oriented and thoroughly evaluated on a week to week basis.

The director of the Thriving Inc and Accredited Exercise Physiologist, Dr Bonnie Furzer, said the students from UWA who volunteered as exercise coaches in the program benefited from a first-hand learning experience and by working with such a vulnerable cohort of young people battling drug and alcohol issues.

“For those students it presented an opportunity they may never have been afforded through their mainstream course work,” Dr Furzer said. Accredited Exercise Physiologist and UWA staff member, Dylan Warner, said it was really rewarding to see young peoples’ attitudes completely change from initial resistance to enthusiastically embracing activities they grew to really enjoy. “We had one participant who was a consistent non-participant when he first arrived, but once we helped him identify a physical activity he enjoyed, he went on to receive an award for his commitment and positive attitude,” he said.

UWA exercise physiology student Jagath Ramaprasad, who took weekly soccer classes as part of the program, said he absolutely loved the experience of working with such a vulnerable group of young people.

“To watch them improve week in and week out was wonderful and to see the joy on their faces when they scored goals at our match on the final day was very rewarding,” he said. The program has now secured further funding from the Commonwealth Bank which will allow it to continue to operate for the next two years and help provide positive outcomes for vulnerable young people in the future.

DAYS – background

The Drug and Alcohol Youth Service (DAYS) is an integrated, multi-disciplinary service supporting young people to access drug and alcohol treatment options and supports those aged between 12 and 21 across WA. It is provided in partnership by Mission Australia and Next Step Drug and Alcohol Services providing community based outpatient services, short stay youth withdrawal facilities and longer term residential rehabilitation.

The catchment area is state-wide, with young people from rural and remote WA self-referring or being referred from other support agencies in WA country areas and focuses on providing flexibility and choice in terms of treatment options in line with accepted treatment guidelines when working with young people with AOD problems (Marsh & Dale, 2006).

For more information on Thriving-DAYS: <https://www.thrivingfit.com.au/projects>

For more information on Mission Australia: <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au>

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