

Bigger & Better – fighting back against Parkinson’s

Submitted by Emma Bracher, Occupational Therapist and Founder of Bigger & Better for the Parkinson’s Excellence Network Community Support Award 2023



As an Occupational Therapist, I am passionate about helping people to take a proactive role in their health and well-being, and I have long had a special interest in Parkinson’s. When my Dad was diagnosed in 2016, I started to focus on how best to help people with the self-management of their Parkinson’s. At that time, there were few exercise opportunities in our area for active and newly diagnosed people. My Dad did not want to join a seated exercise group and, as he was struggling to come to terms with diagnosis, was reluctant to meet people with advanced Parkinson’s symptoms. We realised that there must be others out there feeling the same way so, armed with my professional knowledge and my Dad’s personal experiences, Bigger & Better was born.

Objectives:
Bigger & Better aims to:

- To provide exercise opportunities for active and newly diagnosed people with Parkinson’s
- To help people take a more active role in the management of their condition
- To focus on the high-intensity, high-frequency and high-amplitude elements that have shown to be the most effective for people with Parkinson’s
- To support people who may be struggling to come to terms with their diagnosis
- To reduce social isolation
- To improve confidence and self-esteem
- To improve physical and mental well-being

Intervention:
In 2018, we started as 1 class with 3 people. We now:

- deliver 11 Parkinson’s specific classes per week
- have over 80 members
- have a team of 8 therapists and exercises professionals, all who share the same passion – to help people with Parkinson’s to live well
- link closely with statutory services, Parkinson’s nurses and local Parkinson’s UK branches.

We maintain a focus on:

- ✓ teaching people to think differently about how they move and how to maintain ‘bigger and better’ movement
- ✓ using a functional exercise approach to help people maintain independence in their daily lives
- ✓ fun, motivation and peer support
- ✓ educating our members, health and fitness professionals, and the wider community about Parkinson’s and it’s management.

In our classes are no judgements. Our coaches understand that people can feel different day by day and even hour by hour. We encourage people to turn up even if they don’t feel up to exercising – sometimes just the social stimulation and peer support can work wonders.

Outcomes:
Outcome measures have demonstrated maintenance or improvements in balance and mobility for many of our members, over a period of 1-4 years. In a recent survey, our members reported improvements in general physical functioning, as well as improvements in their confidence and mental health. They reported to find the classes a great source of peer support, and mixing with others helps them to realise that they are not alone. Some of our members had become quite isolated following diagnosis, and coming to our classes has got them active and socialising again. Members meet for coffee after class, and often arrange to meet up outside of our sessions. Great friendships have been formed - some of them life-changing.

Next Steps: We plan to continue growing to help as many people with Parkinson’s as we can, with more classes and more trained health and exercise professionals.

What our members say:

This service has been a life line for me and made such a difference to my life.

When you are part of the Bigger & Better family you are not alone.

Dignity, kindness and care come as a package when you join the groups. I can’t thank Bigger & Better enough.

I would be lost without these classes, dramatic I know but true. There is no embarrassment, we all have the same condition and encourage each other. This classes work because of the trust we have in our coaches and the care and dignity they show us.

Bigger & Better has filled a glaring gap in provision for people with Parkinson’s in the area and I was previously very isolated with the condition. It has provided the opportunity to establish a community of support.

The fact that I make a 50 mile round trip to attend my Monday morning class is testament to the enjoyment and value of the classes.

Great emotional support from the team and my peers. There is a true sense of ‘family’.

