



## Summary Report: Review of the *Leading from Within* programme

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### The Study

*Leading from Within* is a not-for-profit group programme run by a volunteer committee since 2002. It is a group programme where participants attend multiple sessions and undertake a range of activities, including sharing, reflection, mindfulness, art and craft, outdoor challenges, nature walks and diverse discussions centred on participant issues. The groups discuss a range of personal issues and challenges while providing support, acknowledgement, and respect of other people's journeys. The programme's mantra of the *ripple effect* encourages individuals to adopt the responsibility of sharing their learning with others. The programme has developed specific foci, including mentoring, parenting and women's and men's programmes. *Leading from Within* commissioned The University of Melbourne's Department of Rural Health to undertake a review. The objectives of this review are to identify participants' experiences of the programme and participants' perceived impacts of the programme on their lives.

### How was the study conducted?

Information for the study was collected via a range of sources, including reviewing course materials and collecting data from programme participants. Ethics approval was obtained from The University of Melbourne and then data were collected in three ways.

1. A self-completion questionnaire was mailed to all participants; 47 participants returned the anonymous questionnaire for an estimated response rate of 24%.
2. In total 29 interviews were conducted with individuals who had participated in the programme, including some who had not completed the programme. Some of these participants returned to researchers a form distributed with the questionnaires and others contacted researchers about an interview after promotion of the evaluation by programme leaders and committee members.
3. Three focus groups were conducted with the groups of the programme.

### What did we find?

A diverse array of respondents participated in the study and some participated in more than one way. Ages ranged from 25 to 69, and while more women participated, men also completed questionnaires, attended focus groups, and participated in interviews. Respondents were mostly

recent programme participants or those who had participated in the programme's early years. The stories recounted during interviews and focus groups suggested that many programme participants were in need of support and the programme had attracted those experiencing significant challenges in life. The study focused on their experiences of the programme, the impact of the programme and ways that *Leading from Within* could be improved.

### Experiences of the Programme

Experiences of the programme were overwhelmingly positive. A range of factors were crucial to these positive experiences.

- Activities were well remembered, particularly the activity beginning every session on the best and worst, learning about triggers, the activity/discussion on masks, walking and collecting bush activities, art, and outdoor challenges.
- The group was critical to the programme and participants felt empowered by others, learned from others and developed intimate relationships not experienced elsewhere. In the questionnaire, all but one person indicated learning from others and being inspired by others in the group; all also observed changes in others and felt safe to share with others in their group.
- All spoke about feeling safe and believing in confidentiality of the group.
- Being reflective and self-aware were frequently mentioned by interviewees as fundamental to activities and learning from the programme as a whole.
- *"Jenny and Pat are brilliant!"*
- Some enjoyed the diversity of activities but for most it was learning from the activities that they identified as important.



The programme was viewed as 'helpful' and 'useful.' Of the 47 participants completing the questionnaire, all rated the programme's helpfulness as 7 or higher on a scale of 0 (not at all helpful) to 10 (extremely helpful). Interview responses supported this, with one person stating: *"There was [were] no areas that we covered off that I'd go that's a waste of time or anything like that."*

When asked if others could run the programme, almost all interviewees and 80% of questionnaire participants felt other people could be trained to facilitate the programme. Many interviewees qualified this with *"they would have to be pretty special and well trained."* But most felt the programme could be provided by others.

### Impact of the Programme

The programme clearly had a positive impact on participants. A few participants described the programme as *'life saving'* and several others described major life changes as a result of the programme. In the questionnaire, all felt the programme had changed some things in their life and one-quarter felt it had 'completely changed their life.' Almost all strongly disagreed that 'things were

better for a while but not now,' while 96% agreed 'I know myself better' and 91% agreed 'my overall life is better.' All the interviewees and questionnaire respondents indicated they would recommend the programme to others.

To elaborate on the types of impacts of the programme, some comments from interviewees include:

- *"So there is no way in the world I would have ever done this before the Leading from Within program. I didn't even finish Year 9 at school. So I then, I went ahead and did my Certificate IV in Community Services;"*
- *"Being able to talk about what was actually happening" [suicides and losing friends];*
- a decreased urge to use substances;
- *"I was very angry and I'm definitely not that person now;"*
- much better relationships, with partners, at work and with friends;
- *"I started to stand up for myself;"*
- *"...had I not done the program... I don't know 8 years down the track where I would be;"*
- building self-confidence to do things, *"things I was inspired to"* and other things *"I always wanted to;"* and
- *"It literally saved my life."*



The programme had its strongest impact on those who were at a very low point in their lives or struggling with particular issues. Those affected by the suicides prior to the programme's inception seemed to benefit significantly from the programme. What was important for many of these individuals was that the programme came to the participants. Thus, timing and setting were critical for respondents.



The programme was provided to many who were in need. Some participants identified as suicidal at the time of entering the programme, others were challenged daily and many had experienced trauma. The programme seemed to address the needs of these individuals at crucial times.

The group was a key component of the programme and had a lasting impact for many: *"I think that's probably the most powerful part of where I got my change from."* Most participants talked about maintaining contact with others in the group for several years, and some were still in contact 15 years later. The group was a powerful form of support, learning, forgiveness, and pivotal to developing trusting relationships.

### **Improvements for the Programme**

Based on the stories, responses and comments from participants and experiences of the researchers, two areas were highlighted for improvement:

1. Record keeping is critical for the operation and duty of care of any programme. It is recommended that systematic records are kept on enrolment, participation and risk, and as separate to clinical files. Given the marginalised and distressed participants of this programme, such records are critical for programme leaders, duty of care, and risk management (liability) of the committee.
2. Consistent and regular scheduling of sessions was identified as an area for improvement. Some felt sessions were a long way apart and that learning from the previous session was forgotten by the next session. Others felt that more regular sessions would maintain momentum for the programme. Others, however, were happy with the programme as it was delivered.

In addition to these suggested improvements, the sustainability of the programme is also to be considered. Many participants did not pay the full cost of the programme and sustaining regular groups is challenging. Considering the target population, location of the sessions, and how to gain access to those in need may assist in focusing the programme and developing its identity.

Furthermore, as 'going to and being there' in times of need was identified as an area of strength; it is recommended that the programme considers being outreach and going to community settings in times of crisis. Earlier groups seemed to recruit participants from community settings and offer the programme in these settings. This had a powerful impact of engaging participants who reported they "*would not go to a service.*" Returning to community settings at times of need could be a strategy to provide the programme to those who need it the most.

### Conclusion

*Leading from Within* has had significant impact on people's lives, particularly those who experienced multiple suicides in their community and those challenged by current life events. Participants were taught to listen, to reflect, to understand themselves and their triggers, and to be responsible for their own behaviours. These lessons were remembered, talked about, and utilised up to 15 years later; stories told how the programme had altered behaviours, given life meaning, or allowed young people to grieve safely. It made connections between people, provided experiences of trust, and enabled wounds to heal. While some have benefitted more than others, this programme has changed lives and enabled some to improve their opportunities, to grow, and to give to others from the experience.

### Thank you!

The authors would like to thank all the participants of this study who shared their stories. We also thank Jenny and Patrick O'Connell for assisting with the evaluation and trusting us to undertake this work. The authors acknowledge the Australian Government Department of Health's University Department of Rural Health programme. For more information about this study or a copy of the full report, please contact Dr Andrew Hamilton at [andrew.hamilton@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:andrew.hamilton@unimelb.edu.au).