



COMMUNITY HEALTH CHAMPION

FACTFILE

NAME

DENISE DOBSON

ALTOGETHER BETTER PROJECT

EAST RIDING COASTAL HEALTH IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

WHAT SHE DID

Participated in stress reduction, confidence building and walk leader training courses.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DID SHE MAKE?

Used the skills and insights she gained to improve her self-esteem and relationships with her family and promoted physical activity in the community by leading walks.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The East Riding Coastal Health Improvement Programme is building capacity within the area's priority communities to empower residents to be more active, eat more healthily and to improve their mental well-being. With this aim, the project is recruiting and training community health champions to develop and deliver a range of training programmes, workshops and events.

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Attending an Altogether Better course to help her cope while caring for a sick relative was the catalyst for Denise Dobson to confront issues that had been affecting her for years and to start to change her life around. Denise signed up to the Sort Out Stress course, run by the East Riding Coastal Health Improvement Programme, while caring for her mother-in-law who had Alzheimer's disease.

"The course helped me to open up," she said. "My own mother suffers with depression and paranoia, which made it very difficult for me when I was growing up. I've been backwards and forwards to the doctor's over the years but I hadn't faced up to the problem: I was depressed too. When I went on the course, I ended up in tears because it all came out."

What caused the shift for Denise was the simple, brave act of sharing her problems.

"I was at a place in my life where I wanted to

▶ change,” she said. “I’d had my first grandchild. I wanted to move on from just feeling ill all the time. I didn’t realise it was in my power to change. The course made me realise I could. It was by sharing, I realised I wasn’t alone.”

Following the cathartic experience of the first course, Denise was keen to carry on and signed up for another six-week course run by the Coastal Health Improvement Programme aimed at building confidence.

“I’d had the confidence knocked out of me when I was growing up,” she said. “The six-week course taught me to approach situations differently and showed me that I’m not the only one who’s not confident.”

By now, the more Denise did, the more she wanted to do and she received regular support and guidance from the Coastal Health Improvement team, particularly health trainer Jenny Hudson.

“Jenny is worth her weight in gold,” said Denise. “She’s met up with me fortnightly. We started off talking about life in general and what I wanted to do. She got me to go Salsa dancing. She got me to go to a gym and to try using a computer. Jenny’s always at the end of a phone. Only five minutes talking to her and I feel better. She helps me to set my goals and reins me in if I’m getting ahead of myself.”

With Jenny’s encouragement, Denise has taken Walk for Health walk leader training and now leads half-hour walks around Withernsea every two weeks. She has also recently completed a Mental Health First Aid course.

A year on from taking her first big step with the Sorting Out Stress course, Denise has come a long way and has even started planning her future.

“I’m thinking of going to work with older people but I’m using this time to take stock,” she said. “I’ve

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brought up my kids, spent 10 years working in a shop and then looked after my mother-in-law. I’m 47 and I’ve never had time for me before.”

The knowledge and insight Denise has gained as a community health champion have improved her own sense of well-being and her relationship with her family. By passing on what she has learned, she also feels a deeper connection with her community.

“I’ve made so many friends,” she said. “I meet up with people on courses and we regularly have lunch together.

“People look to me now for support. Ladies come along to the carers’ group who are going through what I did. I can’t tell them what to do. But I can listen and tell them about my own experiences.

“On the walks, people come along and they want someone to listen. When they’ve shared something, they feel a lot better because it’s something they feel they can’t do at home. That was me once.”

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Altogether Better was founded on the firm belief that community health champions have the potential to make a significant impact on health inequalities. In 2008, we were awarded £6.8m from the BIG Lottery Well-being Fund to run our innovative, five-year programme in Yorkshire and the Humber. We have 16 locally-delivered flagship projects across the region, testing out different community health champion approaches in a range of settings.

