
Impacts of the Relax Breathe Harmonise Program in Yorkshire, UK

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When I joined, I was tired, I was breathless, I couldn't catch my breath. And when I was offered this, I liked the idea of the singing. I love singing. Not very good at it, but I love it.

And so I joined it not knowing really what was going to be happening, but then they explained the breathing and you realise there's so many tools out there to use to help you control your breathing. You get your breath back and you feel more in control, relaxed. And then once you relax and you realise you can breathe again, then you can start having fun.

I love to sing and to be able to have that control back and to be able to sing was great. That was fun for me. (Relax Breathe Harmonise participant)

INTRODUCTION

Shared Harmonies Community Interest Company (CiC) is a multi-award-winning creative development organisation based in West Yorkshire, UK committed to improving connection, confidence, and wellbeing through inspirational singing. Rooted in strong values and with evidence-based practice, the CiC currently delivers 10 regular in person community singing groups for wellbeing for people affected by long-term health conditions (including COPD, Parkinson's, Dementia and mental health conditions).

In the wake of COVID-19, Shared Harmonies saw an opportunity to develop their services further to design a program specifically for people living with Long COVID. To date, there are emerging studies that highlight the potential for

singing for those with Long COVID (see Cahalan et al., 2022). Relax Breathe Harmonise is a 10-week specialist program designed to support those living with Long COVID. The program was devised in close consultation with National Health Service (NHS) respiratory physiotherapists, Long COVID teams and people with lived experience of Long COVID.

Due to symptoms such as fatigue and anxiety, the program is delivered online, with technical support offered to those who need it. Participants are referred from the NHS or can self-refer via social media and other community recruitment methods.

This article reflects on the impacts of Relax Breathe Harmonise and presents the evidence-based ingredients that form the foundations of this program. At a per head cost of just £145 for a 10-week program, this has the potential to offer significant cost-savings to health services.

LONG COVID

Long COVID has emerged as a health condition resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (Yang et al., 2020). Symptoms include fever, cough, nasal congestion, fatigue and other signs of upper respiratory tract infections (Velavan & Meyer, 2020). It is important to note that COVID-19 is not just a respiratory disease. It is a multi-system condition (Iadecola et

al, 2020) affecting many systems of the body, calling for a holistic approach.

Long COVID or Post-COVID Syndrome is the name given to the “long haulers” who are suffering with several COVID-19 symptoms more than 12 weeks since contracting the virus (Raveendran et al., 2021). Long COVID is characterised by symptoms of fatigue, headache, dyspnoea, and anosmia and is more likely with increasing age and body mass index and more prevalent in the female sex (Bai et al., 2022). Experiencing more than five symptoms during the first week of illness is associated with long COVID (Sudre et al, 2021). Patients have reported feeling unable to carry out routine daily activities, as well as mental health issues including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Carfi et al., 2020).

SINGING AND LONG COVID— DEVELOPING A PEDAGOGY

One participant from Relax Breathe Harmonise summarised the aim of the program as a way to “work on the correct and most efficient way to breathe, to help us adapt to the Long COVID symptoms, and also for our wellbeing”. It is an experiential program that helps participants learn and embed tools to self-manage the symptoms of Long COVID. Each session includes guided relaxation, breathwork exercises (including singing to improve breath control) and facilitated peer-support. The program has been carefully and considerately compiled to provide opportunities to help people with relaxation and pacing—supporting fatigue management.

The pedagogical approach of the Relax Breathe Harmonise program seeks to proactively address key symptoms of Long COVID based on the following evidence:

- **Breathlessness:** Specialist singing with trained practitioners can help with learning breath control and management and therefore aid in the management of breathlessness (Lewis et al, 2016).
- **Fatigue:** Literature suggests that many people with Long COVID recover with holistic support, rest, symptomatic treatment and gradual increase in activity (Greenhalgh et al, 2020). The incorporation of graded activities, relaxation and mindful movement may be effective pedagogical approaches.
- **Vocal issues:** Respiratory conditions can cause adverse effects on the voice (Tong &

Sataloff, 2022) and ability to return to full vocal function is limited (Lin et al., 2023). Long COVID can result in viral-related injury to the vagus nerve (which is responsible for vocal fold muscle function and sensation to part of the larynx) (Helding et al., 2022). Gentle voice exercises, such as semi-occluded vocal tract exercises (SOVTEs), may be effective in supporting vocal function.

- **Poor mental health and wellbeing:** Singing has been shown to reduce the stress hormone cortisol (Schladt et al., 2017), regulate heart rate variability (Vickhoff et al., 2013) and contribute to positive health and wellbeing (Dingle et al., 2021). A carefully crafted singing session, in which the subtle shifts and nuances involved in nervous system balance are taken into consideration, can lead to participants feeling both relaxed and uplifted (Foulkes, 2022).

RELAX BREATHE HARMONISE IMPACTS

An external evaluation of the program was carried out. Results from participant self-report forms and focus groups highlighted the main areas of improvement for participants were:

- **Improved wellbeing:** Participants reported improved confidence, autonomy, self-awareness, self-worth and acceptance, achievement, hope and positivity.

For example:

I think my initial thoughts were, I'll try anything because I've got to a point where I felt Long COVID did take away my life and I joined the course with some apprehension because singing wasn't something that I was good at...

But the first session, that apprehension just went completely, and I came out every week despite still having symptoms. I still felt there was hope. There was light at the end of the tunnel, and I felt like I'm going to beat this. I'm not going to let Long COVID take over my life. I'm going to take over Long COVID. And yeah, I'd recommend it to anybody for that reason. (Participant)

- **Physical impacts** were also reported, such as improved breath control, reduced breathlessness, improved physical ability/stamina, feeling more physically

relaxed, and reduced physical tension. For example:

I started doing it because I wanted to improve. I was desperate to improve my health, especially my fatigue and breathlessness... And as I got further into the program, the more [I learnt] techniques and breathing techniques which really helped. (Participant)

- **Decreased use of inhalers:** Self-reported findings show that for people who had higher inhaler use at the beginning, there was an improvement (Appendix 1). For people with lower inhaler use at the beginning, the improvement was smaller. One to two times per week is the turning point; people who used the inhaler more than once a day generally found an improvement. However, people who hardly ever used an inhaler, or used it once a week, found a smaller benefit
- **General practitioner visits:** There was a marked decrease in general practitioner (GP) visits since engaging in the Shared Harmonies program (Appendix 2).
- **Self-management:** The core of the program is to support people to develop self-management tools. In Appendix 3, we can see the positive impacts of this aspect of the program.

KEY INGREDIENTS

Participants and practitioners were invited to reflect on the “key ingredients” of the Shared Harmonies program. These have been analysed and coded under two broad headings with some overlap:

1. What happens (the components)
2. How it happens (the pedagogy/approach)

The table below outlines details from self-reported feedback from participants and practitioners. Despite equal importance being placed on these components, the most commonly reported ingredient is the sense of community and support.

Table 1: Key ingredients of the Shared Harmonies program

What are the key components?	How it happens: the approach and environment created
Relaxation techniques	Person-centred
Sharing positive affirmations/news	Empathic
Breathing training	Creating a sense of community
Singing	Environment of peer support
Repetition of exercises	Care and attention to the individual
Experiential learning	Flexible
Balance of informative and interactive	Non-judgemental
Space for reflection / sharing and questions	Creative and fun
Progression and building blocks throughout the course	Paced
	Patient
	Reiterating learning
	Motivation and energy of the practitioners
	Highly developed facilitation skills – holding space

CONCLUSION

There are emerging studies that highlight the potential for singing to support those with Long COVID (see Cahalan et al., 2022). Creative and cost-effective solutions addressing the impact of COVID-19 may help to relieve the pressures on healthcare services, especially as it is predicted that “the burden on health, physical, mental, emotional, social and cultural will probably be observed and felt for many years to come” (Roncaglia, 2021, p. 2). Hanson et al. (2022) suggest that some patients who were hospitalised for COVID-19 may require some form of ongoing care to improve long-term outcomes.

It is theorised that people with Long COVID can recover with holistic support, rest, symptomatic treatment and gradual increase in activity (Greenhalgh et al., 2020). It is encouraging to see that guidance suggests multidisciplinary, person-

centred and holistic approaches may be the most effective methods for Long COVID patients. This is perhaps why the Shared Harmonies program is seeing such positive impacts and would like to scale up their model to reach more people living with Long COVID.

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BIOGRAPHY

Emily Foulkes is a practitioner researcher and charity director based in the south west of England. She has worked in music education for more than 20 years, designing and managing national programs and networks. As director of charity Music for Good, Foulkes has developed research and evidence-based programs using music to support health and wellbeing in a range of settings across the life span. Her Masters of Voice Pedagogy enabled focused research on singing and trauma and mental health, chronic pain, respiratory health and multiple sclerosis. In 2021, Foulkes set up the Singing for Health Network, which now has members from across the globe. She delivers training and support to practitioners in singing for health and wellbeing and offers guest lectures and supervision to undergraduate and postgraduate students. Foulkes has published in the *International Journal for Community Music* and in the *Nordic Journal for Arts, Culture and Health*.

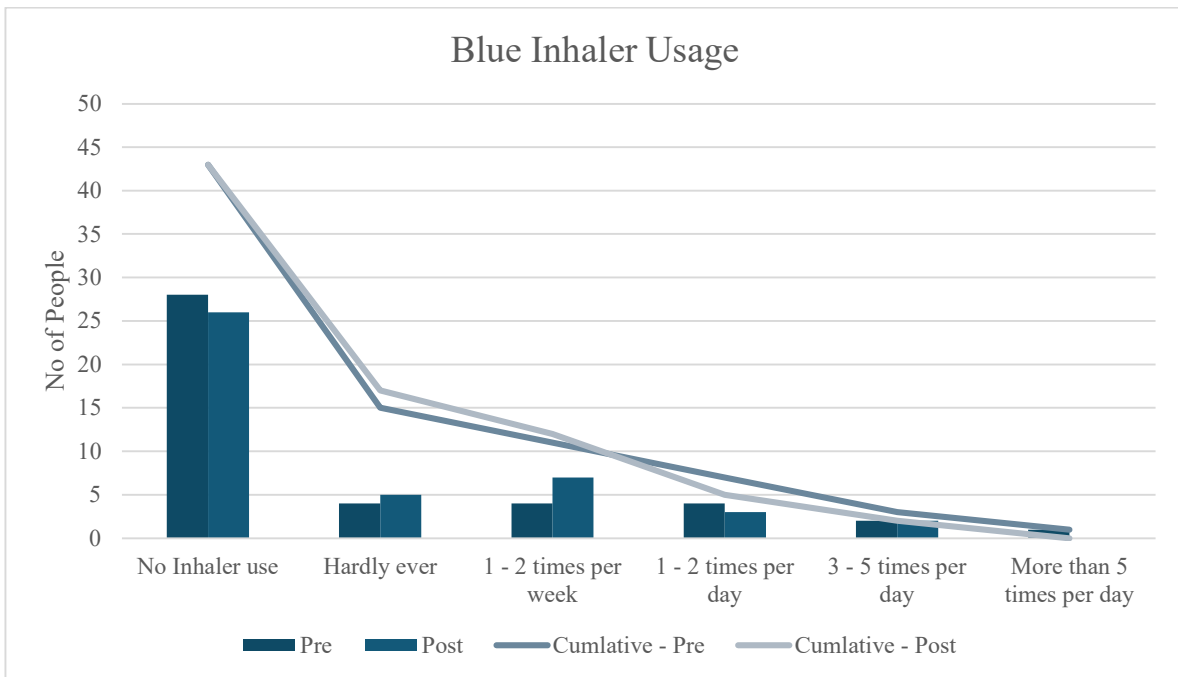
Emma Baylin has more than 30 years' experience supporting transformation for people, communities and organisations. In 2013, Baylin founded Shared Harmonies CIC, an award-winning not-for-profit organisation specialising in creative development services for companies and communities, improving connection, confidence and wellbeing through inspirational singing. Baylin has received a Prime Minister's Point of Light Award for services to communities and was invited to become a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts. In 2023 and 2024, Baylin received Silver Awards from Best Business Women Awards. Baylin is co-author of Amazon bestsellers *Awakening Legacy*, curated by Sarah Parkes and *Shine on You Crazy Daisy Vol.5* curated by Trudy Simmons. She has delivered a TECx talk entitled 'Connecting through Harmony'.

Abigail Mann-Daraz is a singing teacher, music educator, and voice psychology researcher with over 20 years of experience working with marginalised groups. Mann-Daraz runs a

busy private practice on the South Coast of England and online that specialises in harnessing voice and musical confidence through ethical, informed singing teaching, professional coaching, and neurodiverse sensitive pedagogy. Over half of Mann-Daraz's student base is neurodivergent or living with a chronic health condition. Abigail has a BPS-Registered BSc in Psychology and a Master of Arts Degree in Voice Pedagogy. Mann-Daraz is the project coordinator for the AHRC-funded Singing for Health Research Project. Mann-Daraz is a professional singer, who delivers sensitive music facilitation for dementia, palliative care, and grief through her instruments of voice, flute, and piano.

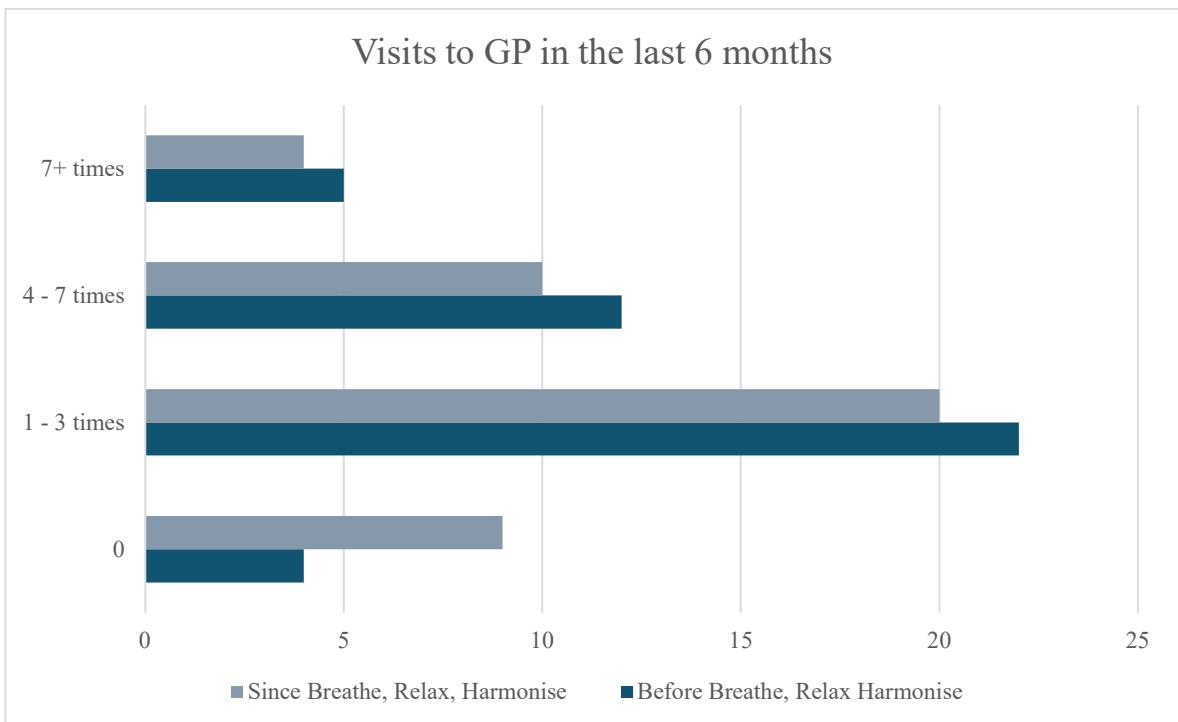
APPENDIX 1

Figure 1: Blue inhaler use before and after the Relax Breathe Harmonise program



APPENDIX 2

Figure 2: Showing visits to the GP in the last 6 month before and since Relax Breathe Harmonise



APPENDIX 3

Figure 3: Self-reported scores on managing breathing and breathlessness

