

darts



Breathe & Connect

Carolanne's Story

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What is Breathe & Connect?

Breathe & Connect is a programme using singing, breathing, relaxation and gentle movement. It is for people who have Long Covid and other long-term breathing-related or health issues. darts developed the approach in 2022 during an intense three-month period funded through Doncaster Council and the Additional Restrictions Grant from South Yorkshire Mayoral Authority.

This period of development enabled darts artists and freelance artists to work collaboratively with each other, and with health professionals, to understand the health and social impacts of Long Covid. The artists worked together, and with groups of Doncaster adults, to test and refine their approach, using their experience of delivering years of singing and dance programmes but adapting the model to respond to the specific needs of Long Covid.

Carolanne's story

Carolanne (not her real name) told us that when she first caught Covid-19 two years ago, she wasn't particularly ill and she thought she'd quickly be back on her feet. Unfortunately, that isn't how it worked out. Carolanne continued to experience symptoms and didn't make progress in recovering. After many months of meetings, she had to make the tough decision that she was unable to work due to her symptoms – despite the difficult financial implications this entailed.

Coming to Breathe & Connect became a real lifeline for Carolanne. She told us that being able to take part in a group where she was completely free from judgement and able to take activity at her own pace was incredibly beneficial to her mental health.

“Having the Breathe & Connect course to go to each Tuesday gives me a lifeline to the real world.”

Carolanne's experience of the Breathe & Connect sessions

For Carolanne, one of the most beneficial elements was that she could take the sessions at her own pace, in a way that suited her. Carolanne told us that, during times when she felt anxious or overwhelmed, and unable to take part in the main group activity, she could join in from a corner

space, feeling involved but separate enough from the group. This allowed her to feel like she was part of the session, but without the pressure of socialising if it didn't suit her that day.

“It is a wonderfully accepting space and the fantastic practitioners are all so caring.”

Because Breathe & Connect is designed to respond to participant needs on an individual level, everyone who takes part can benefit from the programme in a way that is tailored to them. For Carolanne, the atmosphere of acceptance and positivity at Breathe & Connect meant that she could really be herself, not having to hide the difficulties she faces day to day.

“It has literally been a lifesaver when I’m at my lowest because I know that I won’t be judged or held accountable for falling apart in the group.”

Carolanne told us she felt that she could take the sessions at her own pace, able to wear ear defenders or sunglasses when she felt overwhelmed. Because of the open, safe environment that Breathe & Connect creates, Carolanne was able to communicate via her phone when she needed to, and no one minded that she had to leave the room when she felt overwhelmed by a panic attack.

All darts activity is person-led: the highly skilled arts professionals that run our programmes are trained to listen and respond to the specific needs of those who take part. Participant voice, together with research, training and experience, form the basis of darts' work, and practitioners deliver sessions that respond to the needs of the individual, whilst creating an environment that is welcoming, safe and enjoyable for everyone present.

The lasting legacy of Breathe & Connect

Breathe & Connect equips participants with skills that reach far beyond the four walls of the studio at The Point in central Doncaster. The programme supports participants to become more independent, through teaching exercises and techniques that can be taken away, and used at home or whenever the need arises.

Carolanne told us that she benefitted greatly from the breathing exercises and relaxation and meditation techniques. Even though she often can't manage much of the movement activities, she takes part in as much as she can and feels no pressure to join in on everything if she is unable to. She found that, more than simply providing techniques for managing symptoms, Breathe & Connect provided a lifeline for her mental health, and an opportunity to escape the difficulties she faces due to Long Covid.

“Music has always been a key part of my life and it helps to feel like I can keep that connection, in albeit a much more minimal way. The sessions give me something to focus on outside the struggles of my normal life and a reason to keep going through the week.”

The aim of Breathe & Connect is to provide a service for members of the community whose experience and needs have largely been forgotten in the mainstream, now that the lockdowns are over. For people like Carolanne, difficulties brought about by Long Covid are still very much present, and for her in particular, Breathe & Connect is vital in her managing symptoms, and feeling understood and supported.

"I can't express enough how vital your service is and how grateful I am that you provided... being part of a group where everyone understands makes a huge difference so thank you, all of you, for getting the funding, believing you can make a difference, and providing a wonderful session that makes so much difference."