

Episode Three: 'Creative Coping Methods'

Podcast Transcript

Life with Alcohol and Drugs

Host: Rebecca Bradley (Scottish Families)

Guest Speaker: Gillian McHendry (Scottish Families)

Introduction:

This is episode three 'creative coping methods' with Gillian McHendry and Rebecca Bradley from Scottish Families.

Interview Begins

Rebecca:

Hi Gillian! How are you and how have you been?

Gillian:

I'm good Rebecca thank you very much, how are you?

Rebecca:

Yeah not bad, not bad. Glad it's Friday.

Gillian:

Oh yes, I'm just getting ready to finish up for two weeks annual leave and I'm going out with a bang doing a podcast for the first time in my life!

Rebecca:

Slightly rubbing it in but thank you!

So today we're talking about creative coping because this has sort of come around since you joined us in November of last year. You brought the idea of a creative coping group.

So you are the Forth Valley Support Assistant and you work alongside Lynne and Lena in our team. And you brought this idea of a creative coping group which could be used with the people we are currently supporting and potentially offering it to people who will come into our service. So it's just to really ask, what is this creative coping group? Why did you start it? What is it that people do? Where is it heading - sort of where do you see it heading? And why are you so passionate about it as well? Because this is something that Scottish Families hasn't had before, it's quite new as well. So it would be great to hear a bit more about it.

Gillian:

Really it came from sort of an idea I had during the first lockdown. In my community I started a Facebook group there. And it was when we were having our daily walks, you know the one walk a day type situations. And I started the group and lots of members of the community joined in and every week I would post a theme. So while they were out on their daily walk they were to take a picture on the daily theme. And it gave people a bit of purpose when they were in this bizarre situation and I was able to do basic photography things around it. I'm very passionate about photography, it's kinda my therapeutic thing I do in my spare time.

So it took off and when I started the job with SFAD (Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs) I

got talking to Lynne and Scott in my interview about things we could do virtually. A big thing for me is the creative part after taking the photo as well and it's how you display that and different things you can do with that.

I started looking at putting my photos onto wood, and just different things you could do. I realised this is something that we can really get people involved in and encourage people to find their creativity. I'm a great believer that everybody has that in them and it's just discovering what it is that works for you.

I keep telling people you know, I left school and didn't feel creative in the slightest because I couldn't draw a picture of myself! But I was never encouraged to look at all the different outlets so creative coping group is about – not just people who know how to create already, but inspire people to find different things that they can do that's enjoyable and therapeutic and peaceful. I know when I create I get that space to myself where I can just sit and tune into something positive. If it works out or doesn't work out, you know, it's not a big deal. But when it does work it increases your self-confidence.

So since starting the Facebook page, family members and members of staff within SFAD have joined in and we've been kinda sharing photos of maybe gardening, baking, quotes that people love I'm a big lover of quotes that inspire me. And I mean, we really want, as I said before, we really want people to discover what it is that works for them.

Rebecca:

Yeah, so quite a lot of families that we work with and we support, a lot of the time they sort of don't know how to express how they feel. And I know before there's sort of been encouragement of maybe write it down, or to maybe take some time out to yourself and to do things like that.

So really, it sort of follows that vein, it's that way of expressing yourself. It's that way of taking time for you and your day. And giving yourself moments of self-care, moments of peace, and being able to take time away from the chaos of your life and to do something that as you said makes you feel creative and it gives you that self confidence which we know is probably – a family member is lacking in that. It gets quite harmed when you're dealing with a loved one who uses alcohol or other drugs in their life. And yeah, it's just a way, it's sort of a way of expressing, I think that's the way we always look at photography and stuff. It is just a way to express yourself.

Gillian:

Yeah and as you say, we talk about self-care and talk about stuff like that and what actually is that? I think about myself and I think about things that have helped me cope in certain situations and when I feel safe and ready to have conversations about that – I'm more than willing to have conversations about what's happened in my life and why it's led this way because I've got a really strong belief that if one person feels confident and opening up about things that they're going through, it has that ripple effect.

I lost my dad 4 and a half years ago to cancer and something that came from that, right in the early days, I had this really strong want to make – you know the box frames you get? And you've got the scrabble tiles and the photos and stuff like that? I just instantly wanted to start making things that expressed missing my dad and all the things I was going through.

I didn't really follow it at that point and you know looking back I kinda think if I tuned into it then, that was something within me saying this is a way you can cope with this situation. This is an outlet for all the things that are building up inside. But I know everybody's got the process to go through. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. This is what I talk about with family members all the time. Hindsight is a wonderful thing but when you're in something and there's trauma and you can't see clearly, you can't judge yourself too harshly. And this is something that comes a lot with the family members we

support.

There's so much grief involved in this. You have obviously family members that are bereaved. But you have family members who are grieving the loss of the life they thought they were going to have, or they thought their children were going to have. And there's a lot of loss around that. And I really want to share with other people – listen, there might be something else you can do that isn't going for a facial and it's not...it doesn't have to cost a lot of money. There's things that you can do in your own home that are going to provide you that wee bit...that moment of peace, moment of just getting lost in something.

I love it. I mean I absolutely love it. I was never the type of person who enjoyed my own company, I'm quite a social person and I always like to be with people and now I can't tell you how much I love my own company! And that's something that's came from that and it's amazing!

So I've got the record player, I stick on my favourite albums. I come in my wee sun room. Any of the family members I work with will tell you that decoupage has become my absolute obsession at the moment. My sun room is just covered in painted bottles and jars and I've got napkins – yep, it's just amazing! So there's just so much good that come from it and once you kinda get going it becomes contagious, you go into shops and you're like I can make that! I want to try and do that! And giving people that empowerment and saying you know you can do this. And that's somewhere I really want to see the group going.

Like just now we're having these conversations but I think putting the physical act in of actually doing things. Whether it be virtual, I mean obviously we're hoping to go towards these being in person because that's, for me personally the way I learn is through people actually physically showing me. So being able to do that out in the community one day. I've already spoke to some family members who are quite creative themselves and they're kinda getting roped in already in helping me deliver sessions. I know the stuff I'm into, but all our family members are bringing different things to the table and I want all of them there and involved and finding that time for them.

Rebecca:

That's really good to hear. Because you end up finding that so many people have weird and niche crafts or weird niche things that they can do and you're like I never thought that was a thing! And then you all end up doing it. I think it's a cool thing to do and I think it's something people don't necessarily think of. They don't think of let's do something creative.

You did mention that after you deal with that kinda thing, like you said about your dad and dealing with the grief afterwards, and you didn't really know what to do until you seen – oh I want to make that little box frame, I want to do that.

So see if there's anybody feeling the same way right now but maybe doesn't know what they want to do. What advice would you give to encourage people to sort of open up their creativity or what ways can people maybe start doing wee things? Like maybe if they've got a camera phone, is it taking a photo a day? Is it writing something down, maybe a few sentences a day when you wake up in the morning, how you're feeling?

How would you manage people to start wee creative things in their day?

Gillian:

Well it's like what you're saying...for me and for you Rebecca, photography is the thing. You can start off doing a wee bit here and there and the more you enjoy something, the more it kinda grows. Like you're taking hundreds of photos every day and you're learning a craft and that kinda thing.

For me, I'm always really inspired by seeing what other people are doing. So I'm watching, there's some great YouTube videos just now, company called Green Renaissance and they do these

wonderful, I mean they're shot beautifully, it's all different, people from all different walks of life talking about their creativity and what they do and just...absolute different ends of the pole you know! But that for me I find inspiring.

And you watch these wee videos and I mean I would watch things before and be like I could never do that, I could never do that... but that's because we think ourselves out of things all the time. You know your mind creeps in and says no you can't do that so you don't even try. If you go and buy some of the couple of things you need...like for me with the box frames, if I went and bought box frames and scrabble tiles and printed some pictures that would've been me just going. But if you think to yourself no that's too much of a hassle...

Just make the first step. Get the stuff. And that's something I do when I speak to creative people. I do craft stalls and I met lots of new people who create as a way of coping as well and we have wonderful conversations with people like that and it's very much when the mood take you and having the stuff there, and sometimes for me it's that thing of knowing what's good for you and not doing it. Like the going for the walk. You know you need the walk but you can't be bothered moving but you know you'll feel amazing after it. So sometimes I'll get all my stuff out even if I'm not feeling like it and I put everything on the table and before I know it I'm off. And I come out feeling like a new woman!

Rebecca:

It's just that little thing isn't it? It's silencing that wee voice that tells you that you can't do something and going forward with it. One thing I've just thought about on the spot, one thing that's a creative coping for me that came out of lockdown was birdwatching and taking photos of birds!

That way you always see birds and you know they're there but you never really properly look so I've ended up becoming quite a keen birdwatcher! And I've got the binoculars out and write down who I see coming into my garden and getting all their photos! It's really fun and it's lovely to see them all and I've now roped my fiancé into it all now and he sits there and patiently waits for all the birds to come down to the feeders and see what ones they are.

It's even something like that because that might be not what someone thinks oh that's a creative thing to do. But it is! But it is something creative to do and it's something that anybody can do from their house. You can just look out your window or anything and there they are, your walk to the park and they're there, you hear them all tweeting about above you. And for the last few months it's been when all the baby eggs have hatched and all the fledglings are about and you hear them all and you get pictures of all the baby birds and things. And yeah just thought about that there! That's a creative coping thing isn't it!

Gillian:

Absolutely! And this is what I keep saying, it's one of the kinda positive things that's came from the whole pandemic situation. I know there's not a lot of positives but we've slowed down and we're tuning back into nature and you hear people talking about this stuff all the time and it's really kinda all the be it one with nature and all this kinda thing, but really that's what it is. We've slowed down, we're noticing the wee things again that are important and reconnecting with that is reconnecting with yourself.

And that's where, for me, the kinda creative stuff is a way of me reconnecting with who I am inside because I slow down, I stop for a minute and notice how I feel about things. Learning that sometimes things don't work out. Sometimes life doesn't work out for us all the time. The things that we're making don't work out for us all the time. But we can totally stop, look at the situation and say right I'm going to try something different this time and see how it goes.

I think there's definite overlaps on how we live our lives and how we create.

Rebecca:

Yeah, I completely agree.

The group is a Facebook group and so far we've mentioned some of the creative things that people have been doing but what are some of the creative coping methods the group has already looked at. Do you have an example that's really worked well? You also said that some family members are now taking lead on some parts of the group, what is it you're currently looking at?

Gillian:

So what I do at the moment is I post different themes every week. So I'll say – a few of the ones I've posted are like adapt, focus, dedication, release, accomplishment. And it's words that are positive and empowering and things that we're aiming to get out of the things we're creating. We get a lot of photographs from people who have been doing their baking or their gardening. We've got people who write songs, it's lovely, it's really just a mixed bag and it's appreciating people for that and saying 'wow, you've got a real talent there!' And the same is with anything that SFAD touches, it's a closed group and it comes from that really supportive network that we've already got and we want to keep.

Throughout the organisation if anybody wants to join they know they can totally share that with the groups and they can definitely join in through there.

And we just want to keep that SFAD nurturing empathetic style of building people up.

Rebecca:

Yeah definitely, and I like the idea of like a word prompt because that's...sometimes you just don't know what to do or the inspiration doesn't come at all but to give somebody a wee word prompt...it must be quite fulfilling to be able to see what everybody comes up with because you can imagine all the different things that people will have if there's something like 'ambitious' or maybe it wasn't something big like 'take a photo of this specific bird' like for me, but maybe it was just managing to put clothes on and get out the house for the day and go for a walk in the park, that's ambitious definitely. In the last, what is it, 15 or 16 months of this pandemic...it's quite a big thing to be able just to get up and leave your home and take some time outside.

So it's good to prompt people, I think that's always helpful, I personally think that's helpful as well to be prompted as well. Because sometimes your brain is just constant and doesn't give you a break and doesn't let you take that time out that you need.

So you really, it's photography is your big thing. Also photography is my thing as well, I do photography. So we can maybe talk a wee bit more about that because I think photography is obviously... it's a very creative outlet. We see a lot of photographers everywhere, we see some people with the huge kits and the big huge cameras and walking about. And then you've got the sort of amateur or just people that enjoy photography themselves with their kits and then there's all smartphones these days have cameras attached to them. It doesn't matter how high tech the equipment is, there's still all this possibility with a camera. I think you can even still get the little click cameras...the wee disposable cameras as well.

There's so many different things now there in life that you can use to take photos, so, we can chat a wee bit about photography and how it's helped. You have mentioned before it was the loss of your dad that prompted you to do it. And that helped you to become creative. I personally...I lost my mum and that's how I became more in tune with photography. And I always like to think to myself that any of the photos I take she'd of loved to have seen that, because it's true, she would've definitely of loved to see these things and she always sort of encouraged it before and now it's able to do it. So we're both in the same similar circumstance.

So with you and photos, I know we know how it started and stuff. But what it is with taking the photos

that sort of...does it make you feel connected to your dad? Do you feel it still helps with grief? Because we know that grief never does go away, you just adapt to not having the person in your life anymore.

Gillian:

Absolutely, you know. You learn how to live with that. You learn how to live with the grief and how to manage that and it becomes as you say, it's always there. But you are able to still build a life after that and that's really important.

The photography for me and this is what I always say to people, with photography you're always focusing on the positive. You're always trying to focus on something beautiful or something that's inspiring or looking for all the good stuff. Sometimes it's a really nice wee push to get you to do that, especially if you've been feeling quite low. It's very hard to see, especially in the initial days like the first year especially when there's that...it's pretty much shock. And you're not really grasping what's going on and it can be difficult to see the blue skies and the wee birds like you're talking about, it's very hard to see those things.

I think when I go out with the camera I'm motivated to look for the good, and that's something. And as I was saying earlier on, Goode is my maiden name and my dad had two sisters so the name hasn't really carried on. But I've got my business Goode Photography and I feel that's a bit of a legacy. I kinda started playing about before and it was a hobby and it was enjoyable. And I never realised that it was going to become the thing that was going to help me manage that in my life. I never thought for a minute that was going to be happening to me.

Weirdly actually, another thing that I really wanted to do was to use my photography to help people in a similar situation. And I'd been looking for something for quite a long time and then my husband went and swept a chimney at a retreat for young cancer patients. And the charity, I didn't know at the time, I contacted the CEO and I said I'd really like to donate family sessions to the families while they're at their retreat. And the charity is called It's Good to Give and I was like where there you go! There's another Goode! And it was just like a sign! Going down in a situation where everybody feels helpless and powerless to do anything to help anybody but you know, I felt like I was actually physically able to do something of worth for someone in a similar situation. Or, not similar situation because obviously childhood cancer is a very different bag, but you know, looking at the pain around that family and saying I can provide...there's something I can provide someone with that they might get some sort of joy out of.

So that was another way of me creatively coping.

Rebecca:

Yeah! I know, I mean I love photography. I had a...it's rocky at the beginning because you convince yourself you're not good at it but the more and more you do it...even if it's one photo a day or one photo a week, it's that progress.

The way I like to look at photography is like it's making memories. Because I personally felt that I hadn't made enough memories with my mum. I didn't have enough photos with her to remember those things. I had a lot when I was a kid and when I was younger, but when I became a teenager and into my twenties, I didn't have much. And it was that way of thinking I didn't want that to happen with my current family members that are still with me or in the future if I ever have my own little family of children and it's just wanting to create that memory.

But even if you're a family member right now who is going through the chaos of addiction, you might be listening to this and think taking photos is the last thing on your mind. But we can't be sad and down every single minute of the day we're awake. There is always going to be small pockets of time, even if it's very small pockets of time, but there will be some time where we don't feel that sadness. There will be moments where we'll laugh or there will be moments where we feel love and care, it's

always wee things. It's using that moment that you have to share your creativity. To do something about it and then just think, if you look back on a photo that you took a few months prior like 'oh yeah, I remember that' that's a memory you get to put in your head. Or maybe you kept a wee diary and you see Thursday 9th July 2021 'oh I remember doing that' and it's something that's nice to do that. I think because over the last year obviously we've not been collecting a lot of memories because it's been a really hard time for us all. But there's something about that memory collecting that comes from it.

As you said from your own photography business you've done weddings and you've done a lot of product photography and your helping people make memories as well. You're making them for them and giving it to them and keeping it going on.

Gillian:

Yeah, and the family sessions are a biggie because that is at the back of my head all the time, it is at the back of my mind that one day you're going to really wish that was there. I wouldn't lead with that, but it's definitely in my head but I wish I had done that, I wish that me and my family had went and got those. But at the same time, I was looking through my laptop and kinda the old pictures and there's all these photographs that didn't make the cut. All the ones that didn't go on Facebook and weren't in the albums. And me and my husband looked through them all and he was like 'that's our life right there'. See all those wee outtakes, all the wee ones that...they're so funny, right from when the kids were babies and stuff like that. And that's our life right there.

With the last year, one of the most amazing things for me helping the kids through all of this kinda situation was...we were very lucky to be outdoors quite a lot and we were doing all the fishing...we were just outside all the time. And my son said to me, 'this has been the worst year ever, everything's been bad'...he just thought everything had been bad. And we sat on my phone and we looked through all these photos of the bike rides, the fishing, all these amazing things we did just together and I was like 'well look at all this!' Nothing is ever all good or all bad.

And I know when you're feeling low it's very hard to see that. But the reality of it is we've got a mixture of both. And sometimes, you're trying to find that balance again aren't you? You're trying to accept that things are bad but it doesn't mean that everything has to be.

Rebecca:

Definitely, I know, I know.

As a lot of us do say, oh we don't want to remember the last year. But there is parts of it that you do want to remember. Because as you said, good did happen. And as you're saying, photography helps with that because you've got the memory, you've got the wee prompt to say 'look! You did this, you had this fun, you had this nice time.' And I know there will be a lot of families right now who will listen and with their loved one they will have photos with them. And they will call it happier times or something and they'll be together.

And even if it wasn't a happy time, you're still on that photo together and there's still all that love around it.

So there's something special about photography. It's never about who has the most expensive equipment and who can take the best shot. It's all about what you said, looking for that motivation, looking for that good in the world that there is that you can take a photo of.

I think it's great. I think it's brilliant as well and even I'm interested in it now so you might even see me there!

Gillian:

Well we've got staff members coming on! Lena, my colleague in Forth Valley, loves doing interior design stuff, organising stuff in the house. And she shares stuff like that. And we've got one who's good at sharing the funnies that are extremely important. We need the funny. Everything and anything is very welcome.

Rebecca:

If somebody wanted to get involved with the group, what can they do?

Gillian:

So absolutely get in touch with your SFAD worker, and we can share the link and you can ask to join and we'll get you involved.

I would quite like to look at kinda other organisations that deal with similar situations to our own, and get them involved as well.

I think the more voices the better, so.

Rebecca:

It's that simple! Just one link and that's you, you'll be in the group!

It's good though because it's good to have you here and it's good for you to create that group because I think it's something that...you do look at it and think oh why didn't we do that before? But it's just, it's so nice to be able to have somebody come in and say right this is what I'm doing and I'll lead on this. And now it's there and it's nurturing well.

And even interior design! Go on Lena! You've got organisation tips and I'm sure many people will appreciate that. You can be creative in so many different ways and I think it is so helpful, especially if you're a family with a loved one affected by addiction.

It's such a great thing to cope and to help you with your day to day life and a wee break from the chaos of everything that's happening just to do something for you and to enjoy it.

Gillian:

Yeah, absolutely.

Rebecca:

Okay, well I'll leave that there. Thank you so much, that's been excellent! Thank you.

Gillian:

Thank you for having me!

Interview Ends

Exit:

Thank you for listening, if you're worried about somebody else's alcohol or drug use you can contact Scottish Families on 08080 10 10 11 or by email at helpline@sfad.org.uk. We also have webchat and further information on our website www.sfad.org.uk.