

## Impact upon self-esteem of being a member of the CHIVA Youth Committee

The Children's HIV Association (CHIVA) obtained funding from BBC Children in Need to develop their participation work with HIV positive children and young people in the UK. This included developing the work of the CHIVA Youth Committee (CYC), all of whom are HIV positive.

The Children in Need funding was secured with the aim of making a difference to the lives of CYC members in the following ways:

1. Increased self-esteem
2. Reduced feelings of isolation
3. Improved ability to cope with the challenges of living with HIV.

Through interviews carried out with CYC members, this report provides feedback on indicators of differences one and three. Firstly, in reference to increased self-esteem, the interviews attempted to gauge how the young people describe the way they feel about themselves, and whether an increase in self-esteem is in any way attributable to their experience with the Youth Committee. Secondly, the interviews attempted to gauge how the young people describe their future aspirations, as an indicator of an improved ability to cope with the challenges of living with HIV.

This report will describe the interview process and the methodology underpinning the interview questions, before analyzing CYC members' responses through the following themes:

- [Interviewees' feelings about being a CYC member](#)
- [Interviewees' feelings about their self-esteem in relation to CYC](#)
- [Interviewees' feelings about their self-esteem in general](#)
- [Future aspirations](#)
- [Contributors to increased self-esteem outside CYC.](#)

### **The interviews**

Interviews with three randomly chosen CYC members took place on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2014, during a CYC residential meeting. The interviewees were a fifteen-year-old male; a 16 year-old female; and a 19-year-old male.

Interviews lasted for approximately 15 minutes and consisted of general and specific questions designed to gauge the effects upon CYC members' self-esteem, of being a Youth Committee member. Interviewees were told beforehand that there was no right or wrong answer to questions, and that it was fine if they did not have an answer for any of the questions. At the beginning of each interview, definitions of self-esteem were provided to the CYC members to clarify the nature of what they were being asked to discuss.

The questions in the interviews were adapted from various studies and resources assessing self-esteem in children.<sup>1</sup> Given that the interviews were very brief in order to ensure that the CYC residential was not overly interrupted, this report does not represent a comprehensive examination of self-esteem. Rather, the interviews provide an anecdotal assessment of CYC members' own sense of self-esteem in relation to their time on the Committee.

There were fourteen interview questions, which are grouped in this report into five themes.

### ***Theme one: feelings about being a CYC member***

Questions 1-3 were designed partly as a 'warm-up' in order to give interviewees some time to become comfortable in the interview situation, allowing them to express negative as well as positive experiences. These questions were also intended to trigger interviewees' general experience as a CYC member, making it easier for them to recollect examples for the remaining questions. The questions were:

1. Do you think being on the youth committee has been a good thing? In what ways?
2. Did you have any doubts or worries about being a youth committee member?
3. Have there been any drawbacks or negative aspects to being on the youth committee?

Responses to the first question were all positive, revealing links between the committee's affect upon members' interpersonal relationships and skills, and their self-esteem.

The practical work of the committee, involving public speaking and teamwork with other committee members, has afforded these young people the interpersonal skills to feel more assured in voicing their opinions, indicating an increase in their self-esteem. This increase seems to be the cumulative effect of numerous factors.

Firstly, the committee acts as a safe space that allows for the building of trust between members, where they 'get to know people more closely' because 'everyone is in the same position' of being positive. As another committee member put it, 'Before camp<sup>2</sup> I never thought I could speak to anyone with a status but after camp and being on the youth committee, it has

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<sup>1</sup> Ellie L. Young and Laura L. Hoffman, 'Self-esteem in children: strategies for parents and educators' (Handout for families and educators. National Association of School Psychologists: Bethesda, Maryland, 2004); 'Revised Janis and Field Scale' and 'Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale' in Todd F. Heatherton and Carrie L. Wyland, 'Assessing Self-Esteem' in Shane J. Lopez and C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Positive psychological assessment: A handbook of models and measures* (American Psychological Association: Washington, DC, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> The interviewee is referring to CHIVA's residential support camp, Freedom to Be (F2B) for HIV-positive young people living in the UK aged 13–17.

broadened my perspective and knowledge. It has been really good to connect with other people.'

The opportunity to be open about their HIV status with other positive young people might also be seen as increasing committee members' ability to undertake wider, public-facing work that involves advocacy for positive young people, as demonstrated by this interviewee's description of the transition from camp attendee to advocate: '[I] started last year as a camper when I was not outspoken. Magda and Abi helped me get my voice across, which has helped me as a person and has helped others.'

The social skills that are gained from being a committee member arise from 'many opportunities' including 'getting involved with the wider world; meeting new people.' The benefits of encountering new people extends to the effects of committee membership upon members' increased assuredness around their own opinions, as well as an increased ability to consider the thoughts and feelings of others: whilst the experience of being a committee member means that 'You are able to have your say,' it has also helped members to 'be more open with ideas,' suggesting not only an increased confidence in voicing personal opinions but also an increased ability to consider the experiences of other people.

This general broadening of social engagement can be seen as affecting both the personal and public arenas of committee members, as the opportunities for public engagement around the personal issues of HIV has made members 'more confident and mature.' In short, as one member said, 'Being on the committee makes you feel better.'

In response to the second question, one interviewee had no doubts about joining the youth committee, while the other two interviewees had some doubts over their ability to perform the role of committee member.

One of these two respondents referred to worrying that they would disappoint people with the decisions that they were partly responsible for through the committee, while the shyness of the other interviewee made them initially feel that they were 'not sure I was right for the role.' Both of these responses indicate elements of low-self esteem, through the concern over disappointing people and the concern over not fitting in. The doubts of the second respondent were dispelled by talking to former committee members who 'assured me a voice is a voice. It isn't about personality but it's a responsibility. My position might help others in the same position. Really glad I ended up joining.'

Asked if there were any drawbacks or negative aspects to being a youth committee member, the interviewees were of the opinion that overall, there were no drawbacks. Two interviewees did point out, however, that being a committee member sometimes results in missing days of school, when there is 'important stuff going on,' and that being a member of CYC can unexpectedly act as a reminder of being HIV positive: 'Sometimes [...] you're not paying attention to your status but the committee reminds you of it. It's a reality check, but not in a bad way; it can be a reassuring.'

### ***Theme two: feelings about self-esteem in relation to CYC***

Questions 4-6 move from the general experience as a CYC member, to gauging whether CYC membership has had a positive impact upon self-esteem. In order to assess this impact, questions 4 and 5 are concerned with the ability to cope with challenges, which is an indicator of self-esteem levels. Having focused on their ability to cope with life challenges including living with HIV, question 6 offers interviewees the opportunity to describe their self-esteem in relation to being a CYC member, in terms that may not necessarily be indicated by their ability to negotiate difficult situations:

4. Do you think being on the committee has helped you cope with living with HIV?
  - a. In what ways?
5. Has being on the youth committee helped you to deal with challenges or difficult situations (either inside or outside the committee, and not necessarily to do with HIV)?
6. Do you think being on the youth committee has made a difference to your self-esteem?
  - a. Can you describe your confidence/self-respect before and after joining the youth committee?

In response to question 4, all three respondents felt that being on the committee had helped them to cope with living with HIV, in various ways. Firstly, the committee offers 'a little relief from being at home and school. You can be more personal with people. It's more down to earth.' This suggests that the committee offers a space where members can be honest about their status, which is a psychological relief from places such as school where there is a concerted effort to omit personal details about one's HIV status.

The increased ability to cope has also come about from meeting other positive young people: 'It helps that there are people in the same situation,' and the youth committee 'has let me know that there are other people out there and that I have a say in matters that affect me.' There is, in this second response, a connection between shared knowledge of HIV status and a sense of empowerment. This feeling of empowerment is raised again by the third interviewee, who said, 'Being on the youth committee gives me a sense of control of my status and position. Being on the youth committee helped improve my views toward it and my coping on a daily basis.'

In contrast, responses to the next question, which asked whether the youth committee had helped to deal with challenges or difficult situations, were less definitive, with two respondents answering, 'not sure' and 'not really.' It is worth considering, however, that for these young people, there is perhaps no greater challenge than living with HIV, and the wording of this question potentially draws them away from the topic of living with HIV. Whilst this is an appropriate question for generally gauging self-esteem, it is perhaps redundant when used in conjunction with the previous question. Despite this,

one interviewee did answer that being a committee member had helped them to deal with challenges not necessarily to do with living with HIV, through a forum started by committee members. The forum has general topics, and has helped the committee member to resolve issues by providing answers to questions about starting university.

The final question on the theme of self-esteem in relation to being a CYC member, asked interviewees whether they thought being on the committee made a difference to their self-esteem, and whether they could describe their confidence before and after joining the committee.

One interviewee thought that their self-esteem hadn't really changed, while the other two thought that their self-esteem had improved. As with responses to the opening questions, the two members who felt that their self-esteem had improved, suggest a connection between increased self-esteem and increased interpersonal skills: 'I was really shy before. It took time to let people in. Being on the youth committee and seeing different people has helped with my self-esteem. Speaking in front of people has helped with meeting people, confidence.' Or as another committee member put it, 'Before, I was self-absorbed but now I talk to people quite a lot.'

### ***Theme three: feelings about self-esteem in general***

What may appear as small gains might in fact be large, when contextualized through interviewees' general sense of self-esteem. Therefore, by exploring members' general feelings about their self-esteem, questions 7-11 allow us to gauge the relative impact upon self-esteem through CYC membership. Questions 7 and 8 draw upon the idea that how we value ourselves is mirrored by how we think we are perceived by others. Questions 9-12 return to interviewees' more direct assessment of their self-worth. In questions 10 and 11, this is measured by whether CYC members have difficulty in enjoying themselves, or place a great deal of value upon the opinions of others, both of which can indicate low self-esteem. These questions also draw connections between general assessments of self-worth, and the self-assessment of being a Youth Committee member:

7. Do you think people value and respect you?
  - a. Do you feel valued and respected when you're on the Youth Committee?
8. Do you feel valued, respected, and loved by people you have significant relationships with (family, friends, boyfriend/girlfriend?)
9. Do you value and respect yourself?
  - a. More, less, or about the same in comparison with how you value people you know?
10. Are you able to enjoy yourself, in general? (If unsure: Do you ever find it difficult to enjoy yourself?)
11. Are you worried or bothered by what people think about you?
12. Are you proud/satisfied with the work you've done with the youth

committee?

- a. Can you give examples of how this work makes you feel about yourself?

Asked whether they think people value and respect them, the three interviewees predominantly responded that they did think this was the case. One respondent was hopeful, but also showed signs of doubt: 'I hope so! It depends who. My family, yes. With friends I'm not so sure. Primary school was not so good [because of bullying]. But now, yes. But sometimes, when you're kind, people take it for granted.' The insinuation here is that the interviewee is not sure if they are respected, or if people are taking advantage of their good nature.

Another respondent answered affirmatively, with an example: 'When I was a camp leader I had to speak to young people and was nervous. I thought they wouldn't listen but afterwards realised they did listen and respect.'

All three respondents felt valued and respected in their CYC role. The dialogue that takes place within the committee, involving the negotiation of different opinions, creates a space where members feel respected, as one interviewee explained that, 'On the committee everyone listens to everyone's opinion regardless of whether you agree. It's good, [it helps] to develop ideas to put across to young people.'

All three members felt valued, respected and loved by people they have significant relationships with. As with the previous question, this was made less definite for one interviewee, by the skepticism that what might appear to be respect was in fact the exploitation of kindness. Drawing upon new situations and relationships at university as well as established ones, another CYC member was unequivocal that they felt respected and valued: 'Yeah definitely. I feel respected and valued with friends and family.... I get along quite well with uni flatmates.'

Asked if they value and respect themselves, all three committee members said yes. One clarified that they valued themselves, but was less certain whether they respected themselves owing to a tendency to 'beat myself up about when I get things wrong.' This same interviewee, however, did recognize that 'Last year I didn't respect myself but now I do.' The second interviewee was the only one to clarify that they respected and valued themselves 'about the same' in comparison to how they value people they know.

Finally, in a similar vein to the first interviewee, one committee member valued and respected themselves, but felt disappointment when unable to take confidence in their own thoughts and feelings: 'Sometimes I second guess myself and feel I've let myself down by doing this but in general, yes. I still struggle with confidence a bit. But confidence is slowly getting better more and more.'

In response to being asked whether they are able to enjoy themselves in general, and whether they ever find it difficult to enjoy themselves, only one committee member was clear that they were able to enjoy themselves and did

not find this difficult. One interviewee was unable to answer this question, which was clarified by the response that they often find it difficult to enjoy themselves. This same interviewee also suggested a degree of low self-esteem in the response to the next question, where they are somewhat worried or bothered by what people think of them: 'I suppose. It happens a lot in education, where people take strangers' opinions over close friends' opinions.' This response seems to suggest concern with what people think of the interviewee through a consideration of the effects of being ignored, or having one's opinions rejected in favour of another's.

The third committee member's response was more directly related to their status. Although this interviewee felt able to enjoy themselves, they have 'recently realised my status holds me back a bit. There's a second sense of 'what if?' But this is good in the sense of being in control. So I have a good time and realise what I'm doing.' The infrequent occasions where this interviewee does find it difficult to enjoy themselves was also related to their status: 'Sometimes having a complex relationship with meds makes it difficult but in general it's fine.'

HIV status was also something affecting another committee member's response to the question of whether they are worried about what people think of them. Whilst 'not really bothered' in general about what people think of them, this interviewee specified that they are sometimes 'Worried that if someone knew about my status, they might discriminate against me.' The third committee member answered unambiguously that, 'Yes. I'm quite sensitive to what people think or feel towards me. I try to leave a good impression. I don't like letting people down [and] try to please everyone.'

All three committee members indicate varying degrees of self-esteem through their ability to enjoy themselves and the significance they place upon what people think of them, some of which they relate to their HIV status. The responses to the following question, however, demonstrate a helpful degree of pride in the work they have done with the Youth Committee.

All three CYC members answered 'yes' when asked if they are proud or satisfied with the work they've done with the Youth Committee. Although one member 'feel[s] like I could help a lot more,' they also recognise their achievements through 'Taking part in presentations to people, giving them awareness, educating people, emotionally touching people.' For this interviewee, such achievements have had a positive impact upon them: 'This feels good; you've placed something in their mind; you've changed understanding.'

The other two members made similarly positive self-assessments of their work with the Youth Committee, stating that it 'Makes me know I have a voice about myself; it has made me more confident in myself.... and that the work of 'Going to conferences and speaking to well-respected medical people, who value my perspective [and] want to know how I feel gives me a sense of pride.' Making a difference – to themselves and society – through their work with CYC has increased the pride and self-worth of its members, which is reflected in their future aspirations.

#### ***Theme four: future aspirations***

Having future aspirations acts as an indicator of healthy self-esteem. Therefore, question 13 deals in four parts with not only whether interviewees have future aspirations but whether and how being a CYC member has had a positive impact upon these aspirations:

13. What are your future aspirations?
  - a. How confident are you that you'll be able to achieve these aspirations?
  - b. Have these aspirations changed since being on the youth committee?
  - c. Has your confidence in being able to achieve these aspirations changed since being on the youth committee?

Two of the three CYC members interviewed had future career aspirations, with one wanting to be a Navy engineer and the other with aspirations around architecture and photography. The one who did not have a career aspiration had an equally well-considered objective: 'I just want to be happy. I'm not sure career-wise but my main goal is to be happy with life.'

Asked how confident they were that they would be able to achieve their aspirations, two interviewees replied that they were 'very' confident and 'pretty confident,' while one responded that they were, 'Not too sure; I'm not sure about tomorrow let alone the future but I feel optimistic I'll find something.' It is worth pointing out this last response was from the CYC member who did not have a concrete career aspiration, and so the lack of certainty over achieving future aspirations should be read in this context. And even with this degree of uncertainty over a future career and finding happiness, this CYC member maintains a sense of optimism.

Out of the three CYC members, one had not experienced a change in aspirations since being on the youth committee. A second interviewee had experienced a change of sorts. Responding 'Yes and no,' this interviewee explained that changes in aspiration had come about in the sense that, 'with people in the same boat, you see what you can and can't do but now this doesn't stop you.' The result is that this CYC member has the 'same aspirations, but I plan them differently, now.'

The third interviewee had also experienced a change in aspirations since being on the Youth Committee: 'When I started I had big dreams but didn't realise the reality. I've realised now what I really want and to be pleased with life. The people on the Youth Committee and being on the Youth Committee has helped with this.'

Asked whether their confidence in being able to achieve their aspirations has changed since being a CYC member, two interviewees answered 'yes'. One interviewee gave no answer, as this was already touched upon in their

response to the previous question, which described how their CYC role has resulted in a more realistic approach to their aspirations. Coming from the same interviewee who described a sense of optimism about their future, this realism might be argued to imply an increased confidence in attaining these aspirations.

Significantly, these responses suggest that while aspirations may not have changed, the confidence of CYC members in achieving their aspirations has increased.

### ***Theme five: contributors to increased self-esteem outside CYC***

The Youth Committee is not of course the only thing to impact upon the self-esteem of its members, and there are numerous factors that may have improved CYC members' self-esteem during their lifetime. The final question put to CYC members was designed to explore what non-CYC factors may have contributed to their self-esteem, in order to acknowledge the interconnections in young people's lives between their Youth Committee membership and wider social activities. This acknowledgment demonstrates the wealth of experience and self-development that CYC members bring to the Youth Committee, alongside the CYC membership that may have an impact upon their self-esteem:

14. Apart from being on the youth committee, can you think of anything else that has helped your self-esteem? (This could be recent or not so recent.)

One interviewee could not think of anything outside the Youth Committee that had helped their self-esteem. Another CYC member acknowledged that alongside their work with CHIVA, spiritual faith had played a role in improving their self-esteem: 'Spiritual help, church, has helped a lot. I used to have very low self-esteem and being on CHIVA and working together has helped this.'

The final interviewee also recognised the role of CHIVA alongside non-CYC activities that had helped their self-esteem: 'Sports teams and committees at uni. Social events where you have to talk. I was quiet at first but the Youth Committee has helped me to approach people. Different experiences have helped increase my self-esteem.'

We might summarise that for one CYC member, being on the Youth Committee plays a prominent role in increasing self-esteem as they were unable to think of anything outside the Youth Committee that had helped their sense of self-worth. Responses from the other two members, however, indicate an interconnection between CYC membership and other activities: faith and recreational groups provide CYC members with support that increases their self-esteem, whilst also acting as arenas where interviewees utilize the interpersonal skills they have acquired through CHIVA.

## Conclusion

The interviews documented in this report demonstrate that Children in Need funding has contributed to making a difference to the lives of CYC members through improving members' ability to cope with the challenges of living with HIV, and increasing their self-esteem. These differences have been made in a number of ways.

In summary, the self-esteem of CYC members has increased through:

- The acquisition of interpersonal skills around public engagement and teamwork, helping members to confidently voice their opinion and advocate for others.
- A wider arena of social engagement, where CYC members are exposed to different opinions and experiences that develop their maturity.
- Social engagement with distinguished figures, whose willingness to hear the voices of CYC members affords these young people with a sense of self-worth.
- Feeling valued and respected in the role of CYC member.
- Feeling a sense of pride in the work achieved as a CYC member.
- An increased confidence in being able to achieve aspirations.

The ability to cope with the challenges of living with HIV, has increased for CYC members through the following ways:

- Being a CYC member has contributed to an improved view of HIV status.
- Working with other positive young people has contributed toward an empowering sense of collective action, and the feeling of control over one's status.
- The safe environment of CYC, where all members are 'in the same boat,' allows for trust between members: members can be open and honest about their status, potentially lessening the psychological burden of secrecy and improving their ability to cope.

Considering the self-esteem issues highlighted by interview responses, demonstrated through suggestions of self-doubt and a concern with others' opinions of them, we can conclude that the increases in self-esteem for these young people through CYC membership is significant. All three interviewees had aspirations, some of which related to career goals and some of which related to broader life goals. Different as these aspirations are, all three CYC members felt a sense of optimism for their future.

**Linda Toocaram**  
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