

### **An Interview with SMART Facilitator Stew Talbot in Fife.**

Stew Talbot is celebrating hosting his 1000<sup>th</sup> SMART Recovery Mutual Aid Meeting week beginning 10<sup>th</sup> October 2022. He has offered them consistently to the people of Fife in Scotland over an 8 year period and I don't think anyone has facilitated this many before, certainly not without a break in service! This is a remarkable achievement, so I took the opportunity to meet Stew and interview him to learn more about him and his career. We had a conversation but within it I asked prepared questions or referenced certain things, so I have typed it up in the order it naturally happened. So here he is, I am delighted to introduce Mr Stew Talbot, Coaching and Motivational Interviewing Practitioner at Drugs, Alcohol and Psychotherapies Limited (DAPL) in Leven, Fife:



#### **Early career and finding SMART.**

Historically, I worked in the music business as a tour manager, guitar tech, stage tech - a roadie for various bands and I got to travel all round the world. Unfortunately, my own addictions grew out of that and got worse and worse to the point I couldn't maintain my business, lost my home, wife, everything and decided to get into Recovery. That was just over 12 years ago. I moved to Scotland from Sussex and did a few different jobs for different people but I always had this idea that I wanted to do something working in recovery.

I finally came up with an idea of forming my own group called Artsworth. The idea was to provide art classes and lessons for people in recovery. It was just a vague idea at the time and I looked for funding to do it round Fife. I contacted all the local drug and alcohol agencies with my idea looking for advice. The only one that replied was Martin Denholm from DAPL who invited me in to a meeting. He was really supportive and recommended a course run by the Scottish Drug Forum. However the deadline to apply had closed but he advised me to contact SDF and see if they would accept an application. I did that and was accepted onto the Addiction Worker Training Programme.

#### **Getting trained up.**

During that time, I did placements at DAPL and at Addiction and I met Jardine Simpson (now SRC) who gave a talk about this thing called 'SMART Recovery' that I hadn't heard of. I thought 'blimey that's all the stuff I've been doing' and it really resonated with me – I really liked what I heard about this SMART malarkey. I spoke to my DAPL placement manager and told him how impressed with

SMART I was. He said that they had just started SMART up at DAPL and so I did the facilitator training course. I started co-facilitating and each meeting I did a bit more and each meeting the facilitator (now my Line Manager at DAPL Susan Innes) would step back a little more and ask me to take over to the point I was facilitating alone.

To start with I was really nervous and would really bone up on just one tool the night before a meeting and then whatever anyone came up with in a meeting check in and agenda setting, I would turn it round to that tool. It's quite a common thing new facilitators do is to deliver what they know the most but that way I went through all the tools and I learned them all. By this point I was a fully qualified facilitator and had finished the SDF course.

DAPL told me they wanted to create a new role of Recovery Worker, and suggested I might like to apply. I did, got a good grilling, quite an intense interview and was offered the job. So within a month of finishing my Addiction Worker Training Programme I was working at DAPL as a Recovery Worker and that was my first role in Recovery.

DAPL had created the role and we then needed to define what was I going to provide and offer? One of the things I could definitely offer was SMART so I became the lead for SMART Recovery and also acted as a SMART Volunteer Recovery Co-ordinator for Fife for a good few years.

### **How has your role changed over the years?**

My role has changed and adapted as I've trained and progressed and so my current role is now Coaching and Motivational Interviewing (MI) Practitioner because I am trained in M.I and Coaching. I offer 1-2-1 sessions of Recovery Coaching as well as all the SMART meetings and I also do a lot of our assessments. Our DAPL assessments are treatments in their own right so within the assessment you will get an alcohol or drug brief intervention, MI and maybe a couple of SMART tools or anxiety tools. I am not a therapist in the way a Counsellor is but I have trained in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy, and Metacognitive Therapies as well as basic Counselling Theory and Practice etc. so I do have a grounding in all these tools and I use these within my coaching.

*\*Charlie: you are much more than a SMART Facilitator, during your time at DAPL you've developed knowledge and skills in a big range of therapies and interventions and that's quite an eclectic mix. Lots of different things creating a really unique skill set. I imagine you are able to coach someone to curate their own recovery journey of what works for them.*

Doing SMART Recovery on a 1-2-1 basis is pretty much recovery coaching, having done it for 8 years my tool bag is very very full! I learned tools used in Metacognitive Therapy at a SMART conference workshop led Professor Marcantonio Spada and I use them now for anxiety help. Anxiety comes up all the time in SMART now and I'll include more and more things like mindfulness and grounding techniques.

### **What effects of the pandemic are you observing in the people you see?**

Since the pandemic people are telling me their anxiety is through the roof and that's why they are using their substance. Life and the way we live today creates more anxiety. A fast-paced life all the time does not give any time for reflection. Anxiety is huge. There is a wonderful Ted Talk by Tim Box about anxiety that I often share with clients: <https://youtu.be/ZidGozDhOjg>

Within a week of the Covid Lock Down we had moved our SMART meetings online. Going online has helped some to people access SMART because you can have your camera off if you are anxious. I'll

say to people you can just come along and listen if you'd prefer, you don't have to take an active part. I have found with online meetings that I find myself talking and facilitating a bit more, people are maybe a bit more reluctant to speak. I think it's something about being on a screen rather than in a room together. I still ask questions, but I lead more if no one says anything. Now were back to face to face meeting I catch myself almost over facilitating and I'm having to retrain myself to facilitate in person again. It can be interesting doing the blended meetings – face to face with a big TV in the room and the meeting owl so I've got some people online and other people in the room. It's definitely a learning experience but hopefully I'm getting better at them.

### **When you first became a Recovery Worker at DAPL how did you get a group together? How did clients find you?**

To start with it was through the DAPL counsellors who would refer people to SMART and recommend it for them. Occasionally people would recommend their mates. Now we will often offer SMART straight away in the initial assessment if it's appropriate. But, of everyone we ask, only 5% of people who are offered SMART will turn up for a group meeting and the reason they often give is stigma. They are worried about coming to a mutual aid meeting and seeing someone they know. Or they are too anxious about actually coming into a group. If I have a conversation with someone about this, I remind them that everyone who's at the meeting is there for the same reason and quite often they have never thought of it that way. If someone comes once, more often than not, they will come again. We know people who prefer to travel to a meeting further away so there's less chance of bumping into someone they know. Within smaller close-knit communities, people can find it difficult or expensive to travel on public transport to outside groups but at the same time because everyone knows each other's business they don't want to risk a local group. It can be the same for food banks where people don't want to be seen.

### **How does it feel to be doing your 1000<sup>th</sup> SMART Meeting?**

I remember the day I was in a SMART meeting at my 5<sup>th</sup> sober birthday and that felt not long ago at all, but it was 7 years ago now so its all gone really quickly. In that time some 5000 people have attended a SMART meeting varying in size from 10-15 attendees to maybe just 1 or 2.

*\*Charlie: I've asked the team if they can ever remember anyone reaching 1000 SMART meetings and they can't so we don't think anyone else has done this many ever before.*

### **What is your own belief about the effects and the benefits of mutual aid?**

It's what I've had pinned up on my wall for years, it the quote "**Surround yourself with people who get it**" It's as simple as that. The idea that although it's your journey to travel, you don't have to travel alone so if you stumble (and you will, we all do) then there is someone beside you to help you back up. Mutual aid is about not being on your own. SMART is here to support you, not judge you. People come to SMART to learn the tools but to be fair unless you put in the work in it's not going to work, and it's easier to put the work in if you are supported by a group. There are some analogies I use in SMART.

Recovery is like learning the guitar, at first it's really hard, you can't believe you will ever learn a tune and your fingers hurt, but with just a little practice every day then playing soon becomes easier and easier and almost second nature and you'll be making amazing music!

I also believe that Recovery has a lot to do with how we perceive and understand ourselves. When we first start recovery, we perceive ourselves as a User that doesn't use anymore and that doesn't mesh well together, our actions and our identity don't fit together easily but over time, and with

unconditional self-acceptance and challenging our own beliefs and ways of thinking, we can change the perception of ourselves into that of Non User so when we choose not use then our identity and actions work in harmony and we no longer feel we have lost or are missing anything.

**Finally, what would you say to someone thinking of becoming a SMART Facilitator or trying SMART?**

People have asked me, 'you know you're here every week, why do you keep doing it, what is it about SMART?'. It's because of the people, because I get to meet awesome human beings, I get to meet really strong human beings. Awesome people and I use that word because I am literally in awe of anyone who says "I am going to make a change in my life and its going to be hard but I'm going to do it and get my life back.". That takes a huge amount of strength. I have met the most amazing human beings through SMART Facilitation. I do 3 SMART meetings a week and meet people and see them change from being anxious and nervous and feeling like they have no control over their life to feeling safe and empowered and feeling like they can come back again. Maybe they won't come back straight away but I can almost guarantee I will see them in 6 months or a years' time when they are ready and know that SMART is there for them when they choose. The stuff you learn in a meeting will sit in your mind like a little seed and then, when you need it, a SMART tool will pop into your mind and you'll use it almost without thinking.

**Any final message?**

One thing I always try to get across to people is that it's really important, that whenever we do anything positive, we reward ourselves with something that isn't our substance(s). If you go a day without a substance you get a treat, if you come to a SMART meeting, you get a treat. This literally rewires our brains and resets the reward mechanism. So if you've done well at anything today, give yourself a treat. Even attending the mutual aid group can give you a treat, just by being welcomed, it gives us the validation and understanding we all deserve.