

Beyond academic support: developing agency through PhD Support Groups



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Background: PhD Support Groups



Prevalence of mental health issues
in PhD population



What works? Limited information on
effective wellbeing initiatives



Research
England

Office for
Students



Catalyst funding for 18 months in 2018 at Queen Mary University of
London to launch new initiatives to support PhD mental wellbeing



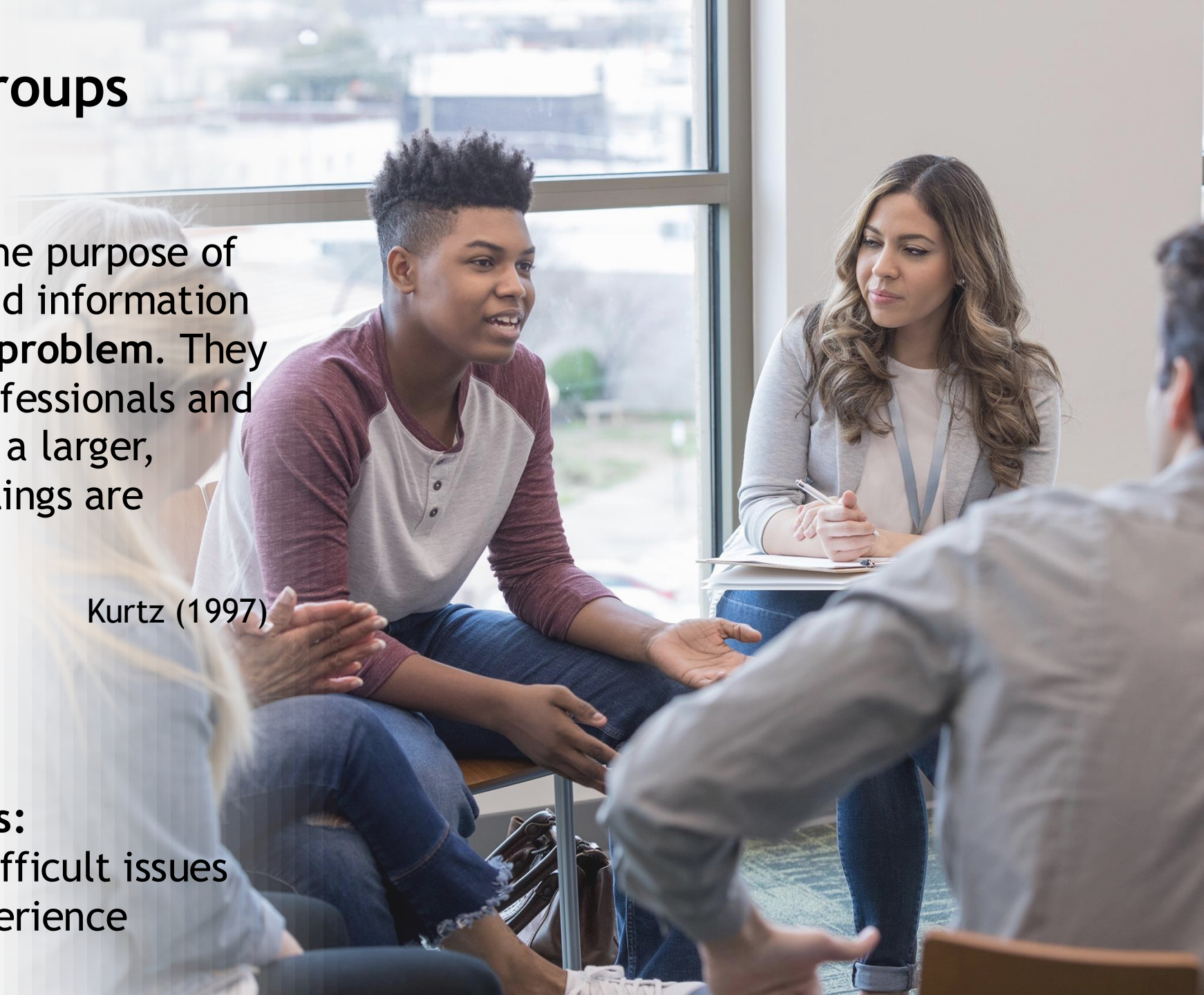
Introduced PhD support groups at Queen Mary
with Benjamin Priest, Counsellor

Defining Support Groups

“Support groups meet for the purpose of giving emotional support and information to persons with a **common problem**. They are often **facilitated** by professionals and linked to a social agency or a larger, formal organization[...] Meetings are relatively **unstructured**.”

Kurtz (1997)

Aim of PhD Support Groups:
support with emotionally difficult issues
related to the doctoral experience



PhD support groups enhance PhD wellbeing

Panayidou & Priest (2021): Key Findings

Following participation in an 8-week PhD support group, participants reported:

- **Significant improvements in subjective wellbeing**
(measured using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale and ONS wellbeing questions)
- **Increased confidence in completing PhD on time**

Note: Initial findings in article were based on 6 groups (n=56), but consistent results were observed across 13 groups (n=109) in total

Outstanding Questions

- Are support groups effective in other research/academic settings?
- Are improvements in wellbeing sustained over time?
- If wellbeing improves, what is actually changing for participants?



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IMPERIAL



PhD Support Groups at the Francis Crick Institute: new environment, similar format

Environment

- prestigious / highly competitive
- research only - no taught programmes

Confidentiality

- small number of PhD students ~220
- space limitations

6 groups to date
8 weekly sessions
75 mins each

Up to 8
participants in
each group

Facilitator present,
but unstructured
conversation

Self-selecting:
82% of participants
had considered
leaving PhD

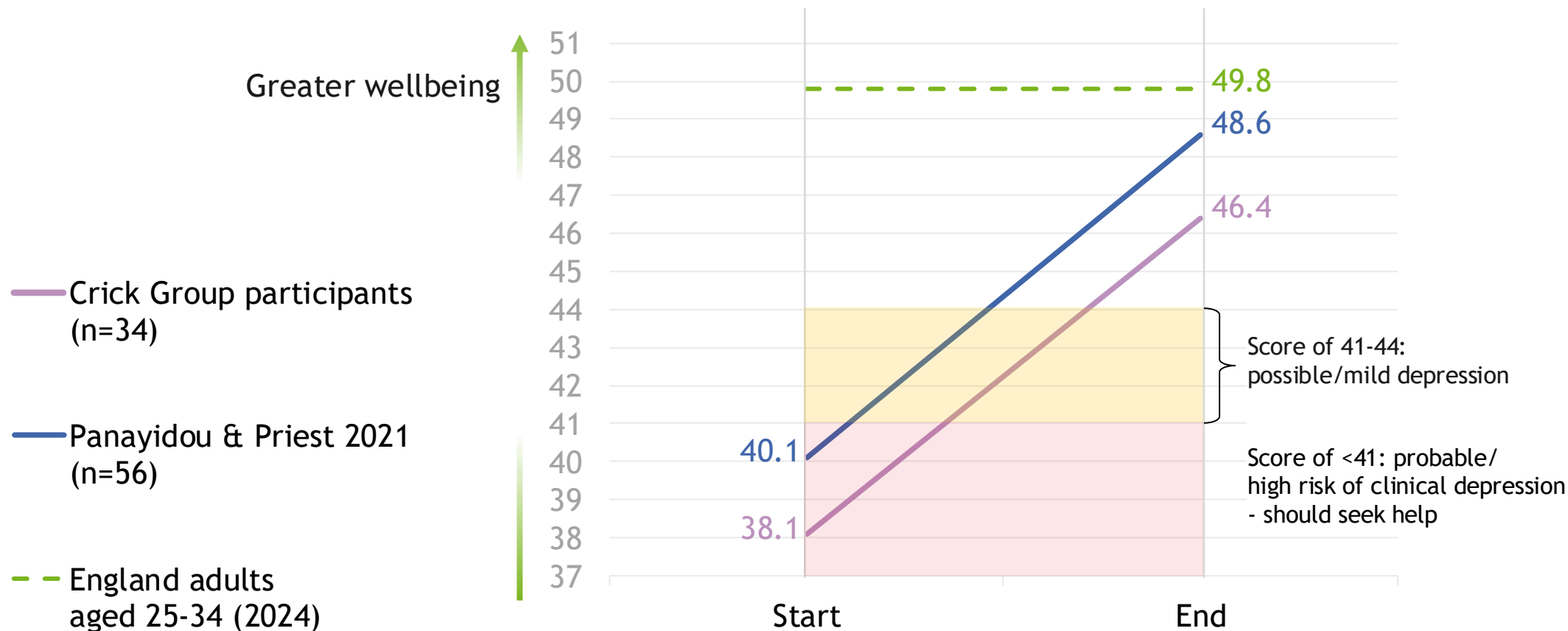
One-off session 4
months after the
end of each group

Wellbeing outcomes for support group participants

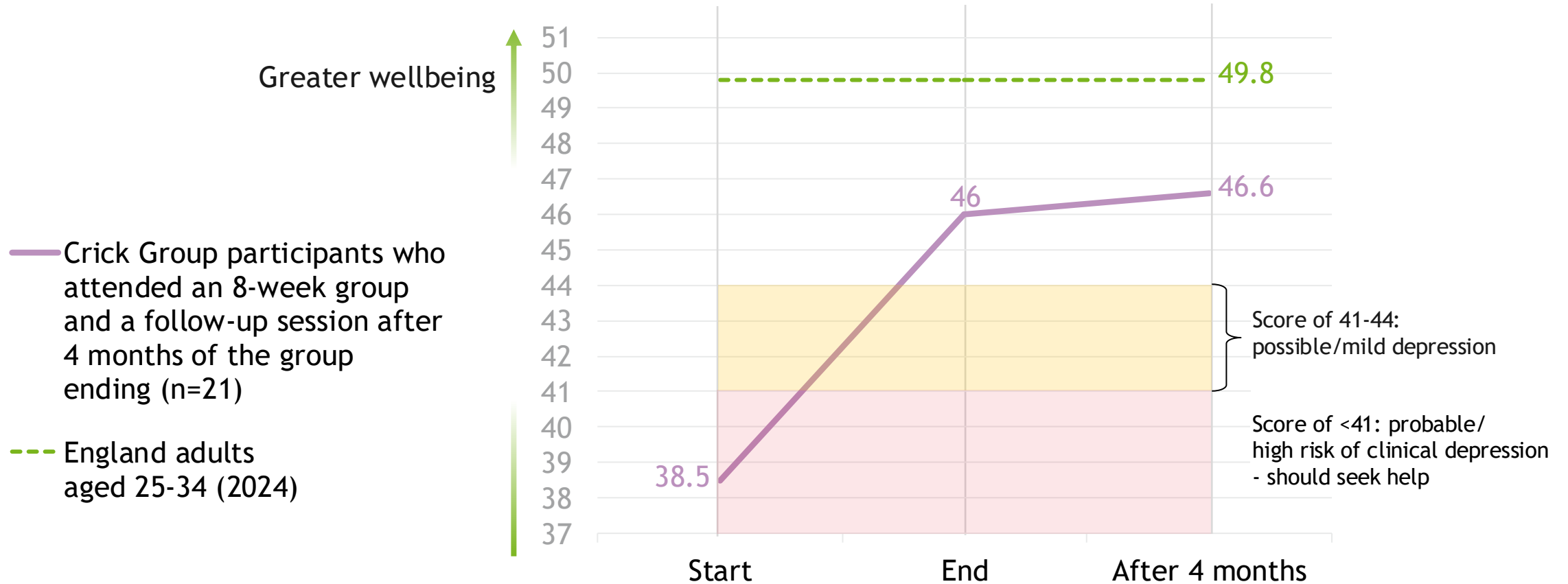


Subjective wellbeing at the start and end of an 8-week group

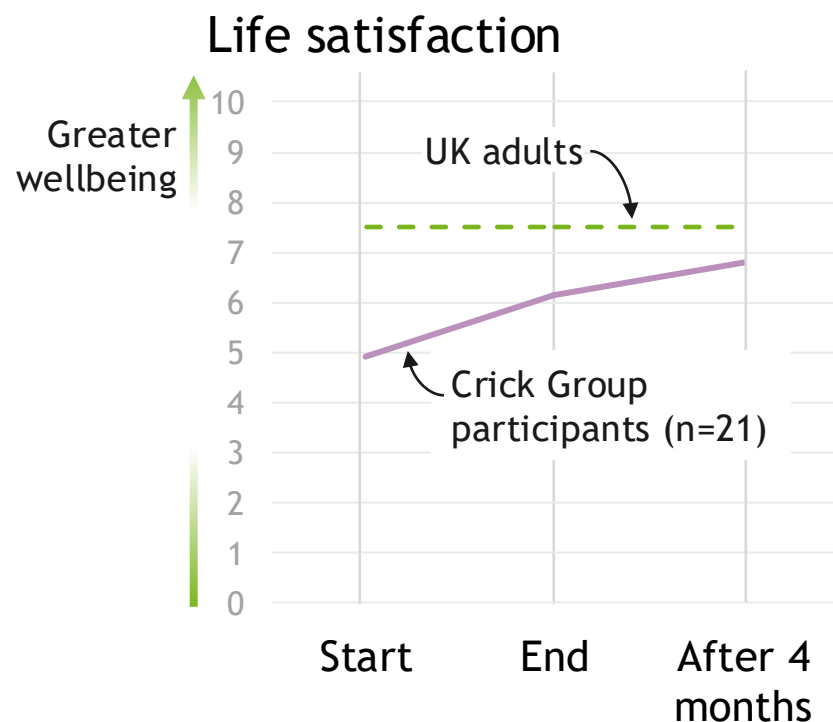
Measured on the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS)



Subjective wellbeing at the start and end of an 8-week group, and 4 months after the end of a group



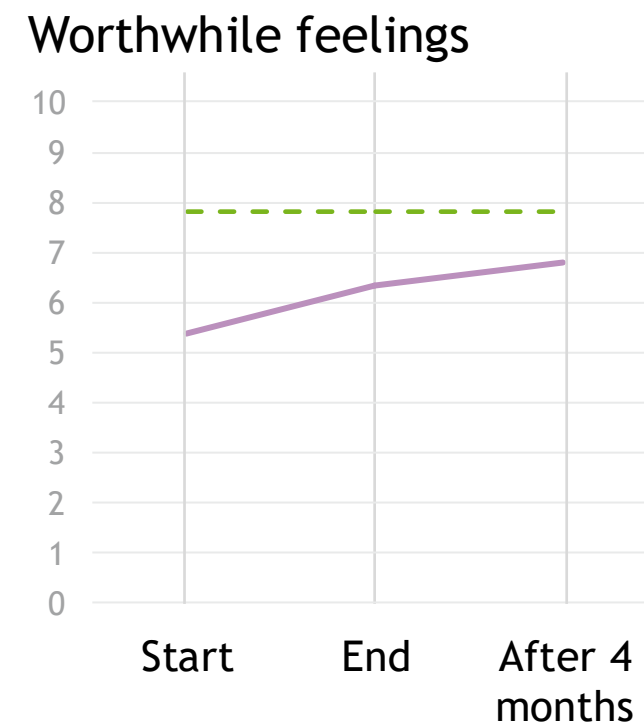
Mean wellbeing scores on the ONS wellbeing 0-10 scale at start, end, and 4-month follow-up of a support group



‘Overall, I am satisfied with life nowadays’



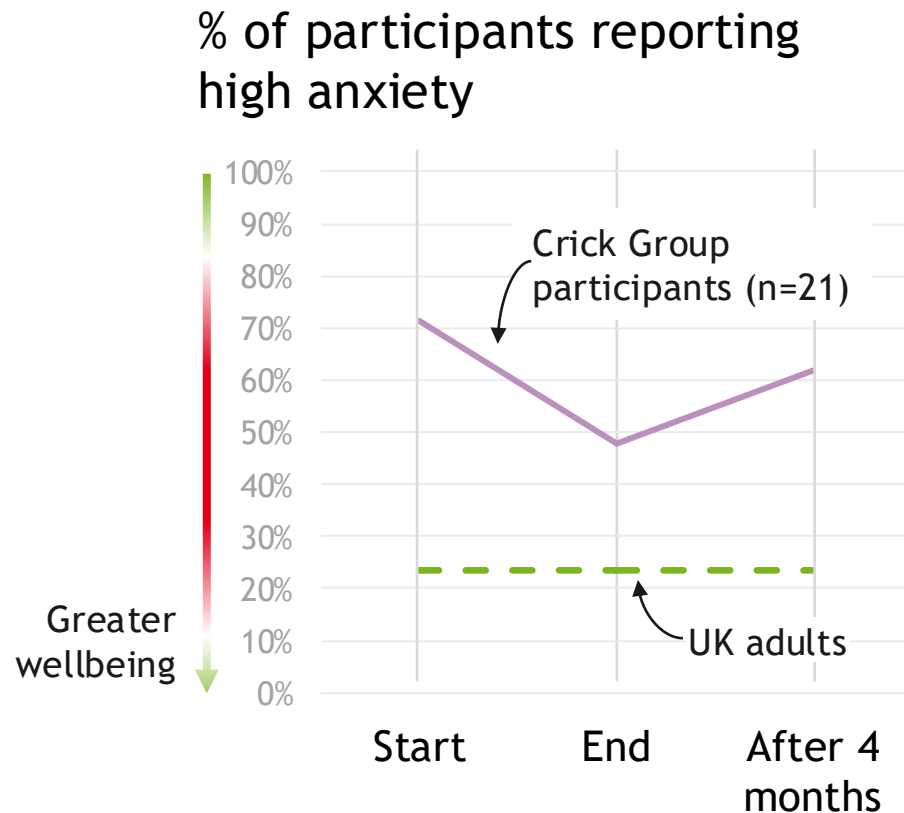
‘Overall, I felt happy yesterday’



‘Overall, I feel things I do in my life are worthwhile’

Fewer participants report high anxiety by the end of a support group, but improvements are not fully sustained

‘High anxiety’: scores 6-10 on the ONS 0-10 wellbeing scale



The % of participants reporting high anxiety drops by almost 24 points by the end of an 8-week group, but increases again 4 months later.

‘On a scale where 0 is not at all anxious and 10 is completely anxious, overall, how anxious were you yesterday?’

Revisiting the outstanding questions

Are support groups effective in other research/academic settings?

- Yes; very similar improvements (large multidisciplinary HEI vs smaller biomedical research institute)

Are improvements in wellbeing sustained over time?

- Yes; at least over a period of 4 months after a group ends

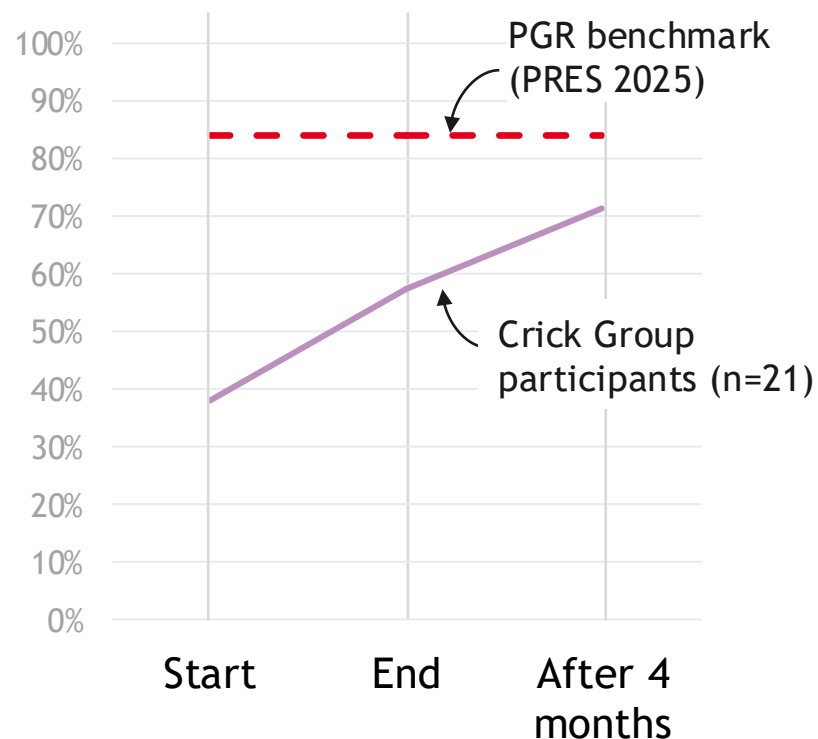
If wellbeing improves, what is actually changing for participants?

?

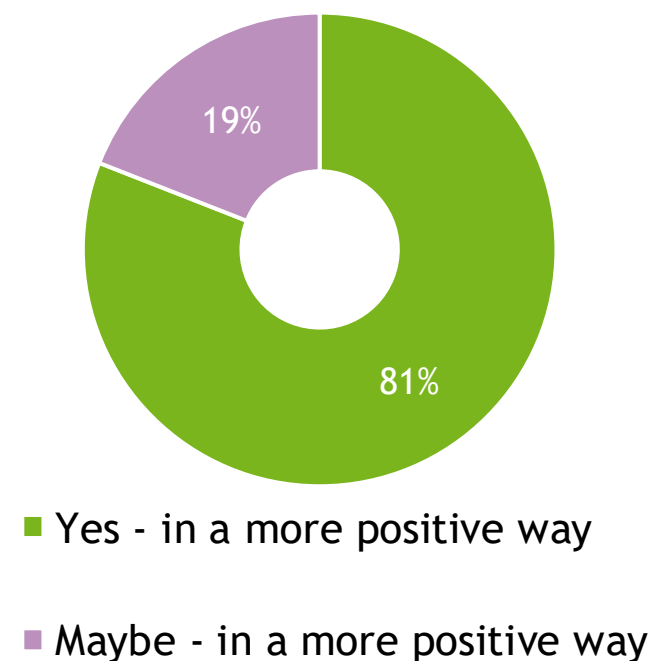
Confidence in timely completion and changing perspectives on the PhD

Confidence in timely completion increases by the end of the group and continues to strengthen over time

% of participants agreeing they will complete their degree within the institution's expected timescale



‘Since attending the group, has your attitude towards any aspect of your PhD changed?’



Developing agency within the constraints of doctoral structures

- Success is not entirely dependent on individual PGRs
- Limited by doctoral structures: funding arrangements, departmental rules, academic norms, support from supervisor
- PhD support groups foster a greater sense of agency by helping participants recognise what they can control and act upon (including quitting the PhD!)

“ I think the group helped me **gain perspective, prioritise myself, and take a more positive action** towards my PhD. I think the same concerns and stressors are there, but I do feel more confident about my own skills and my ability to deal with these concerns.

“ I tried to **slow down my pace of working**. I started to be **more willing to share my feelings** with others.

“ I feel like [the group] gave me more **courage to address particular issues**.

Have there been any positive changes you'd like to share?

Continuing shifts in perspective

- **Detaching self-worth from the success of the PhD project**, improving resilience
- **Dealing with stressors**, leading to a sense of resolution

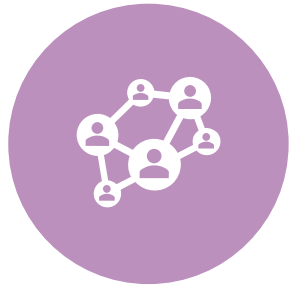
Increased confidence

- **Feeling more capable of tackling problems** after hearing others' perspectives and experiences
- **Receiving validation** for work through external feedback, increasing confidence and motivation
- **Engaging in more honest, authentic conversations at work**, breaking down facades and building genuine connections

Empowerment and self-prioritisation

- **Increased sense of belonging & feeling capable of contributing in meaningful ways**
- **Having a stronger sense of control over own projects** and direction
- **Prioritising personal wellbeing** and proactively addressing concerns and challenges

Helping characteristics of Support Groups



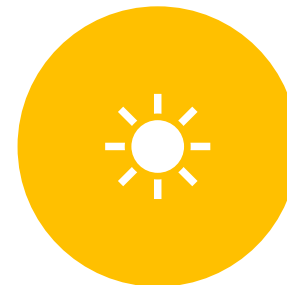
Universality and an alternative to loneliness
the realisation that others have similar feelings regarding the shared situation, leading to a reduction in feelings of isolation



Support
empathy, listening to others, and personal disclosure



Communicating experiential knowledge
learning from own or others' experiences



Instillation of hope
feeling inspired by observing improvement of others or a belief that the intervention may help participants

Summary and recommendations



Support groups are a powerful intervention

- Significantly improve participants' wellbeing, with effects lasting at least 4 months (but more data needed!)
- Foster lasting mindset shifts: increased confidence, stronger sense of agency, proactive problem-solving, and greater prioritisation of wellbeing; all contributing to renewed motivation



Adaptable across contexts

- Effective in both large university settings and smaller, faculty-level environments or research institutes (participants also think their supervisors should have similar support groups!)



Resource considerations

- May appear resource-intensive, but an 8-member group requires ~2 hours of facilitator time per participant
- Approach counselling teams about possible (co-)facilitation

“

I really appreciated having the space to discuss my concerns, vent, and celebrate some small wins that perhaps I wouldn't have been willing to share with other colleagues. The other students have been very supportive and generous with their suggestions and I am very grateful for them.

“

The group helped me crystallise some concerns and I felt encouraged to take action.

“

The most positive change has been a sense that I am not alone in the struggles I have faced. A PhD can be a very isolating experience, especially when you face unique challenges. Understanding how these generalise, hearing other people's perspectives and solutions, I now feel more able to tackle the problems, and they have slightly less impact as others have helped me understand my situation better.

“

I have learnt to take care of myself first before taking care of my work.

“

[The most useful aspect of the group was] understanding other people's similar experiences, learning it's okay to feel negative emotions towards things that go wrong, and having a safe space to chat about unspoken topics like quitting or taking a break.



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