



Being aware of mental health within our befriending projects during COVID-19

The duration of the global pandemic has certainly outlived our initial expectations and, with no end in near sight, many are struggling with the effect the required distancing and regulations have had on their day-to-day life. COVID-19 has infiltrated our social health, physical health and mental health phenomenally in these past months and this themed Q+A and resource has been designed to address that fact.

We will discuss the range of topics that may appear within a befriending project through-out the online session as well as during this document. We hope this is of use to you but please note any questions or request for further information are very welcome. Please contact

Victoria@befriending.co.uk

One of the positives of this pandemic is that people have been much more open and honest about their mental health. There has been such a common ground throughout the nation that the terms “Isolated” and “Lonely” have lost their taboo status they once held. Everyone seems to have had their moments of feeling removed from the community, friends and family. The encouraging result of this is that communities are reaching out for support and to services that specialise in this issue. The problem that we are facing is that the demand for our services and befrienders have surpassed our expectations. There is no way we could have realistically prepared for this situation and demand.

Mental health services are severely strained across the UK normally – during the pandemic statutory services for mental illness and problems has stressed the available capacity and extended the waiting lists immensely. As a result, befriending services have been leaned on.

Befriending projects often have little to no waiting lists and a broad criteria acceptance compared to statutory services that makes befriending seem more accessible and available to those in the community looking for someone to talk to. Our befriending projects can appear like a quick-fix, a mental illness aid to those in need or to some, it can appear as a life line. This, in the majority of cases, is a dangerous misconception as it puts many in jeopardy.

If volunteer befrienders are assumed to be mental illness experts or counsellors or therapists or even just trained in coaching skills, the volunteer **will** be put in a conflicting and distressing situation which could easily cause physical or mental harm to those involved. So, what can we do to try and eliminate this potential risk?

Inappropriate Referrals

As a service, it is important to try and take all possible steps to prevent inappropriate referrals from arriving. Here are some simple steps you can take:

- ☐ Have a checklist at the top of your referral sheet
 - i.e. *“Is the person you are referring aged between 8 and 18?”* Check box
- ☐ Contact potential service users and ask them *“What do you know about our service?”* to eliminate any misconceptions or false information they may have

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- ☐ Research mental illness services and well-being projects in your local areas so that you can signpost to better services to avoid any disappointment or feeling of abandonment the service user may have from being rejected from your project
- ☐ Have clear information on all your materials which makes it clear what the service **is** and what the service **isn't**. This can establish clarity and can allow expectations to meet reality
- ☐ Speak to those that have made the referral – *why have they applied someone to **your** service? Is it because they think you are perfect for their client **or** because you were available?*
- ☐ Be aware that saying no to certain diagnoses is not discrimination if your decision falls under 'objective justification'
- ☐ If you think your organisation *could* support this person, you then need to consider your volunteer. You may have to provide extra training and support to this volunteer but you also must give the volunteer the choice to say no. They should not get involved with anything they are not comfortable with and should definitely not feel pressured to do so

What happens if you have already accepted an inappropriate referral?

It can happen. Sometimes information is withheld by referral agencies and this can be for a mix of reasons (*i.e. to guarantee a positive destination and outcome or for the fear of rejection*). In an ideal world, our screening process can be so precise that we catch these moments but it can be difficult. This matter may be even more true right now during the global pandemic.

What we would recommend is that you have an action plan. Be aware of what may happen as well as what may need to happen. Below are some scenarios to help you with your considerations:

A. You receive a referral with questionable or withheld information

Do not pair a volunteer up with someone if you do not have all the information or know the full story. It is your responsibility to look after the safety and wellbeing of your volunteers *as well as* to provide a service to the community.

- Contact the referral agency and confirm the information
- Contact the person being referred and explain what information is missing and why it is needed
- If you are still not sure, you as a coordinator could provide them with a 1:1 phone call once a fortnight while they are on a “waiting list”. After a few months, you could decide whether you are comfortable or not to pair them up with one of your volunteers
- If you are approaching a volunteer for this match:
 - Make sure they are comfortable with the concept
 - Provide them with additional support and training
 - Sit in on the first meeting
 - Make sure boundaries are established
 - Maintain open communication with both parties and monitor the befriending relationship carefully

B. Your volunteer comes to you needing help

When we train volunteers, we always try to be crystal clear with this message: *“If you have any questions, problems or anything you are concerned about, please contact your coordinator”*. It is advice that the majority of volunteers will remember and do make use of, either during support and supervisions or by picking up the phone.

If your volunteer contacts you to request help, you want to be prepared. The volunteer may be feeling a mixture of emotions such as guilt for not being able to handle the case or anxiety over how their match will take the befriender’s removal from their life.

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The coordinator can step in here.

- Take blame
- Be the befriender
- Give a warning/disciplinary if boundaries have been broken
- Re-establish what the service **is**
- Keep a written record of any developments or changes

C. Your service user breaks boundaries

All befriending projects have hopefully managed to adapt their support and supervision sessions during the pandemic. In line with *Befriending Networks* Good Practice, befriending coordinators should be sitting down with their volunteers 1:1 at least once every six months. This said, with the UK being in lockdown March onwards, we of course understand that this was not possible this year. It is important that some form of private session with your volunteers still takes place, whether by video call or phone call. We need to ensure our volunteers feel appreciated, cared for and supported in their role but these sessions also provide you with the opportunity to pick up on tensions, conflict or someone over-stepping the boundaries.

Volunteers can often be put in uncomfortable or confusing situations as the befriending relationship grows. As a volunteer coordinator or project manager, you want to ensure all service users are aware of what your befriending project *is* and what it *is not*. People are more likely to push the boundaries when they are feeling particularly isolated, lonely or vulnerable. This has been the general feeling for many during lockdown.

If left too long, a volunteer may feel they need to end their match and, in some cases, end their volunteering altogether. The coordinator can step in here:

- Sit in on a match meeting and observe the dynamics
 - You could explain that this is a matter of quality control and you're just checking in with all your matches to see how the service is performing in distance method
 - Help the volunteer to feel at ease

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- Contact the service user for a catch up and to get some feedback on the volunteer
 - Use this relaxed conversation to establish the boundaries of the service and remind the service user what the project is all about
 - Let the volunteer know this will happen and speak to them afterwards to let them know how it went
- Once you have all the information, make an informed decision to decide whether you are comfortable with the match going ahead. If you are, speak to your volunteer and make sure they are the same

D. Your volunteer breaks boundaries

We recommend befriending projects install a *Boundary Agreement* if they do not already have one. This document confirms what is and isn't allowed within the match and is signed by both parties at the beginning of their befriending relationship. The agreement also states the disciplinary action that may take place if said boundaries are broken.

During a 1:1 with your volunteer, go through this agreement and highlight what boundaries have been broken. Make sure to explain *why* they are in place to begin with. You will most likely know from the reaction to this conversation whether or not your volunteer knew they were over-stepping or not. Depending on the seriousness of this situation, you can decide what to do. If the boundary is related to mental illness and over-stepping by inserting themselves as an out-of-hours helpline for example or the role of a counsellor or psychologist, this is very serious and could be extremely dangerous. Please make sure to act immediately.

E. The volunteer is really struggling with what they've heard in their 1:1's

This can happen. When working with vulnerable people, and after building a trusting relationship, befrienders may be seen as a confidant for them to talk to about difficult situations or past traumas. Befrienders can be friendly, empathetic and understanding in nature – but these types of difficult conversations can be draining for the volunteer and can leave them feeling quite helpless.

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What can a volunteer coordinator or manager do?

- ☐ Please ensure all your volunteers are aware of both your confidentiality policy and your safeguarding policy. We want volunteers to feel they have an open communication line with their coordinators so that they know they *can* and *should* pick up the phone to discuss the service user's wellbeing and safety as well as their own when needed.
- ☐ You can prepare for these situations by providing your volunteers with a signposting guide. Research your local area and find out what services are nearby. Create a contact sheet with the local helplines, housing support, human rights, citizen advice, mental health projects and more so that a volunteer can make safe and accurate recommendations to a service user if the occasion arises. This can also be a useful contact sheet for your service users to have for any needs they may have out-with the befriending hours.
- ☐ Contact the service user to check in. You don't need to alarm them and make them feel they have been betrayed – just let them know you are checking in. Ask if the volunteer has kept all their appointments, if they are happy with the service and ask them how they are doing? How are they finding lockdown? If they choose to confide in you then this would suggest they are happy to talk about it and might be very grateful for a suggestion of a specialist service or project that could assist them.
- ☐ Ask the volunteer how they feel about the match and whether they are comfortable to continue it. Ensure you make it clear that they do not need to feel guilty about ending the match as the volunteer's wellbeing is just as important.
 - If the volunteer chooses to end the match, ask them if they are comfortable to give 2 – 4 weeks' notice. This way you can arrange a conversation with the

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service user to express that the volunteer has had a change in circumstances and sadly has to leave the project but it allows for a few more visits in the meantime. This means the service user is more prepared for the end and will hopefully feel less rejected or abandoned.

- If the volunteer chooses to end the match but is not comfortable to provide that notice period, you as the coordinator/manager can step in to provide the 1:1 service. This way, you may gain a better understanding of the situation and from here, you will have a much better idea of what level this referral is “inappropriate”. From this experience you can decide whether the project can no longer support them OR whether a volunteer with additional training and support could manage the case.

Conclusion

As with any case, it is important to look at it with a person-centred approach. Policies, procedures and guidelines are in place for a reason: use them, but make sure to treat those involved as individuals and take the time to listen to their situation and opinions so as to ensure you have all the information to make an informed decision.

Many services have been more open and welcoming in regards to their service user criteria during the pandemic. Though this is very much appreciated at this time, you have to review what you think your project is capable of as well as your volunteers. Do not push too hard and allow time to make any judgements or decisions.

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