

Samaritans submission of 13 January 2023

PE1942/E: Encourage peer support programmes in public sector organisations

Peer Support can play a vital role in supporting mental wellbeing and helping develop a network of support. We know that peer support services are key to fostering connection and providing meaningful activities for people to take part in. However, too often peer support isn't accessible as and when people need it. Our research into loneliness has found that many respondents, and especially young people, reported peer and community support not being available to them when they need it.¹

In our report, *Hidden Too Long*, respondents with lived experience of self-harm highlighted the positive role that support from the community, including colleagues and peers, could play in reducing isolation and providing emotional support. In particular, peer-to-peer support was identified as a positive model for reducing stigma, sharing real experiences and encouraging help-seeking.² Among respondents with lived experience of self-harm in the UK & ROI, 8% had sought support from some type of group activity following their most recent experience of self-harm, while nearly 1 in 10 (9%) sought community support in the form of peer support, a helpline or text support, online support groups and online therapy.³

Across all sectors, there was a strong sense that community services like peer support groups, helplines, and third sector initiatives play an important role in supporting people in connection with self-harm specifically or by addressing the underlying causes of emotional distress. Stakeholders highlighted the role national and local policy could play in elevating and investing in community services to ensure that they are sustainable, and supporting community services to work in conjunction with other sources of support.⁴

Discussions with stakeholders working with at-risk adult groups highlighted the positive role of community services, particularly those

¹ Loneliness, Suicide and Young People: <https://media.samaritans.org/documents/loneliness-suicide-young-people-jan-2019.pdf>

² Hidden Too Long: https://media.samaritans.org/documents/HiddenTooLong_uncoveringself-harminScotland.pdf

³ Hidden Too Long

⁴ Hidden Too Long

involving peer support. Engagement with stakeholders highlighted the importance of ensuring community support met the needs and experiences of different demographic groups – men, women, young people, LGBTQI communities, BAME communities – recognising where tailored approaches may be beneficial in addressing specific challenges and barriers faced by those groups.⁵

Our *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* research focussed on the experiences of less well-off middle-aged men. The men who participated in the research reported wanting to feel like they had something in common with others, whether that be shared experiences, or shared enjoyment of certain activities. Men found it easier to deal with the issues that they were facing when they knew that there were other people experiencing similar things. They liked knowing they weren't alone in their struggles.⁶

Some found it useful to discuss their experiences and strategies for coping directly, whereas for others, it was enough to know that the people around them had their own issues, without directly talking about them. Many of the men built up relationships with other attendees and started looking out for each other. The men appreciated it when people noticed that they were not there. A lot of men talked about dropping out of services and then being drawn back in because someone noticed and sought them out.⁷

The services that were most successful at engaging men over a longer period of time were usually initiatives that had appeared organically within the community. They were often developed and run by community members who had similar needs and experienced a gap in services. This meant that the initiatives were often built around the culture of that community and used language and concepts that were familiar to that community. By using familiar language and concepts, the men said they were more likely to engage because the initiatives felt less intimidating.⁸

Alongside peer support, employers have a role to play in ensuring the conditions of the workplace support mental wellbeing. Suicide is complex and is rarely caused by one thing. However, there is strong evidence of associations between financial difficulties, mental health and

⁵ Hidden Too Long

⁶ Out of Sight, Out of Mind: https://media.samaritans.org/documents/Samaritans_-_out_of_sight_out_of_mind_2020.pdf

⁷ Out of Sight, Out of Mind

⁸ Out of Sight, Out of Mind

suicide.⁹ Evidence on the association between working conditions, debt and suicide suggests that increased, involuntary part-time work, job insecurity and workplace downsizing are important risk factors for suicidal behaviour.¹⁰

Peer support programmes in public sector workplaces are welcome as part of a wider network of support. Alongside continued investment in peer support, Scottish Government should ensure sustainable investment in talking therapies and wider third sector community support to enable greater direct access and options for referral for those who are struggling but may not need tier 3 or 4 services. To ensure people have support as and when they need it more sustainable investment is required to promote and deliver 24-hour open access crisis support for those in distress and crisis.

⁹ Dying from Inequality:

https://media.samaritans.org/documents/Samaritans_Dying_from_inequality_report_-_summary.pdf

¹⁰ Dying from Inequality