



Penumbra

Annual Report

Self-Harm Service Aberdeen

April 2009

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Service Aims and Objectives

The Penumbra Self-Harm Service for Aberdeen began in 2004 with a remit to: allow young people to talk about their problems in a non-judgemental, safe and friendly environment; offer support and understanding to enable young people to cope with a crisis and develop the skills to help them take control of their lives.

The Service offers advice and information on alternative coping strategies and provides young people with an hour of 1:1 support per week, through a variety of user defined means, such as face-to-face, via e-mail, text messaging or over the phone. The Service aims to provide a non-judgemental, young person friendly and user led support service to young people who self-harm in Aberdeen City. It also explores and caters for the needs of families, friends, carers and professionals who are in contact with young people who self-harm. The Penumbra Self-Harm Service works with young people to examine the kind of support they feel they need regarding self-harm. The main objective is to give advice and support on harm minimisation and to signpost young people to other useful agencies. The Service is committed to empowering young people and acknowledging that they are the experts in their own lives. It has now been running for 5 years and continues to deliver the following:

- Establish and support the development of self-harm support groups for: people who self-harm; parents; carers and professionals.
- Bring together the individual support groups around common issues.
- Establish links with appropriate planning groups.
- Co-ordinate the Aberdeen Forum for Action on Self-Harm.
- Facilitate and provide training around self-harm, including supporting people who self-harm to be an integral part of the training process.
- Promote good practice across agencies.
- Make accessible and available resources for organisations and individuals.
- Liase with other interested groups locally, nationally and internationally.

- Collaborate with local press and media to reduce stigma and inform the general population on the needs of this group.

Introduction

This report will discuss the activity and outcomes during the period of April 2008 – April 2009 and the future plans for the Service. Service users were asked to complete a short evaluation form so that information could be gathered regarding changes in self-harming behaviour, coping strategies, overall mental health and any areas that they felt could be developed further. Evaluation forms were also gathered from the awareness raising sessions that the Development Worker delivered to other agencies. The information gathered indicates a very high level of satisfaction among both service users and workers from other agencies. Positive comments have been made about the dedication and helpfulness of the Development Worker and the value of the service itself.

When asked if there was any comment they would like to make about the Self-Harm Service people responded very encouragingly, saying:

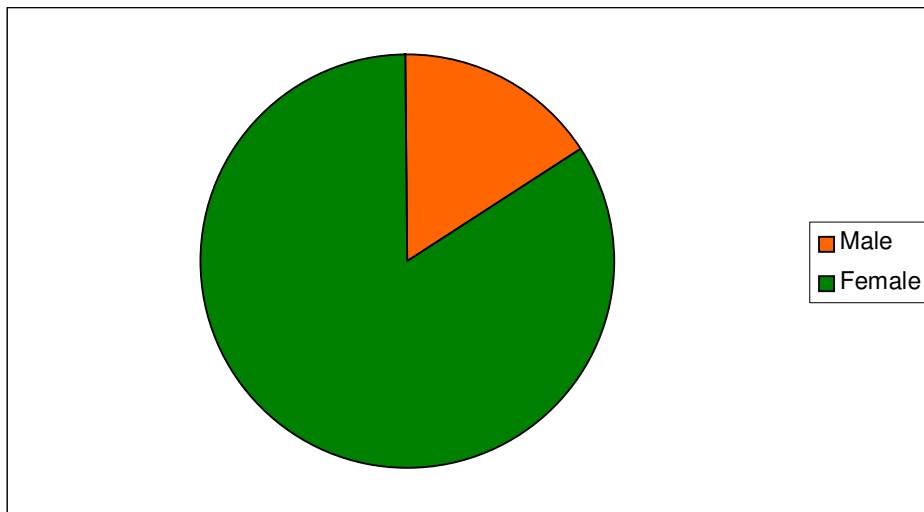
“I have found the project, as a whole, helpful and believe it works well.
I have found Barbara (Development Worker) to be very pleasant and understanding but more importantly non judgmental.”

The feedback from awareness raising sessions at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary Accident and Emergency Department have shown that what the staff find the most useful is having input from a service user:

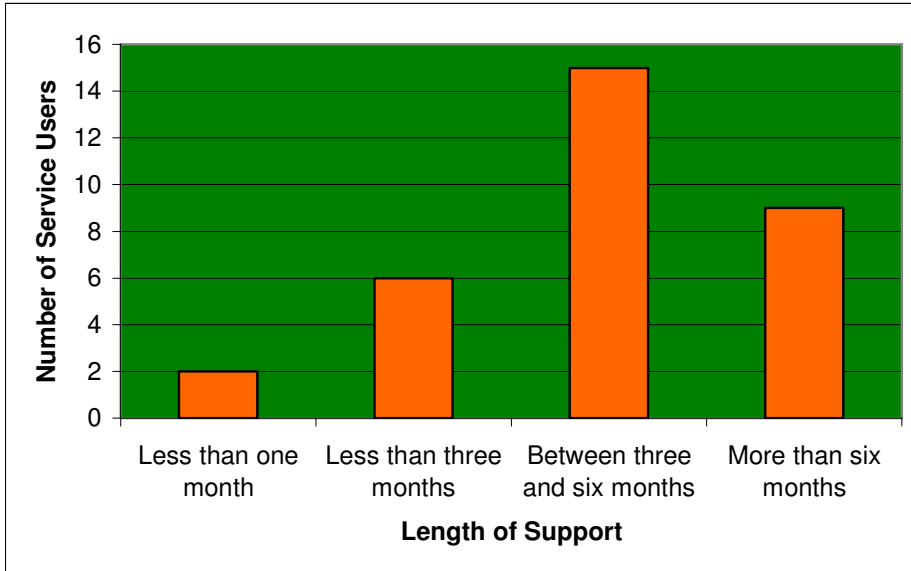
“Very helpful to hear from ‘patients’ perspective in A&E ward.”
“Good Aspects were covered, good to hear thoughts from someone who has self-harmed.”

Summary of Service Users

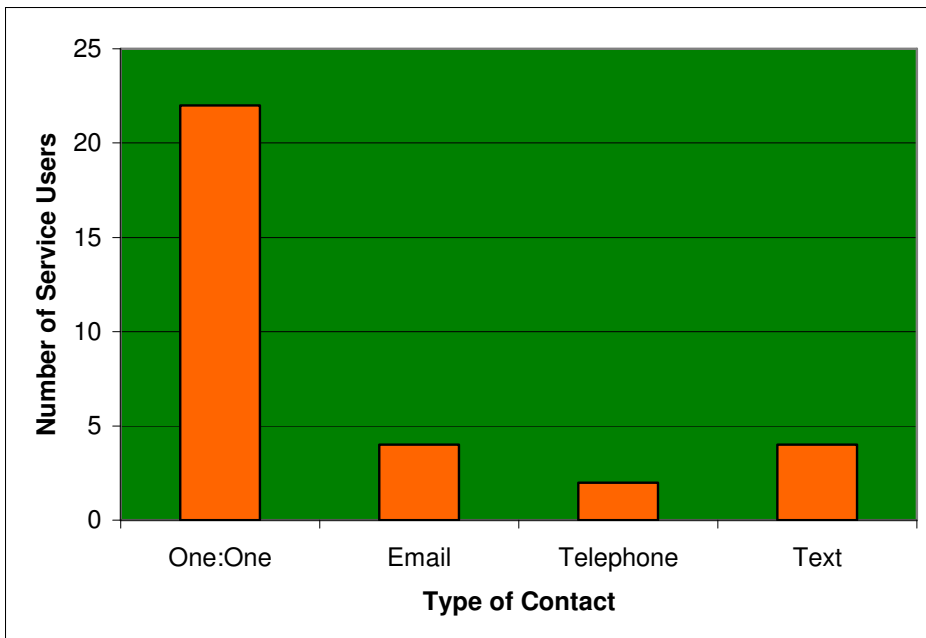
The Self-harm Service is currently supporting 5 individuals on a weekly basis for 1:1 support and has supported 10 service users to move on from the Service in the last year. Since April 2008 a total of 32 young people have been referred to the Service. 17 young people are in irregular contact with the Service, usually via text or email or by accessing occasional 1:1 support. The referrals over the last year have mainly been female although there has been an increase in males seeking, or being referred for support for self-harm. The ratio of male to female referrals is represented in the chart below:

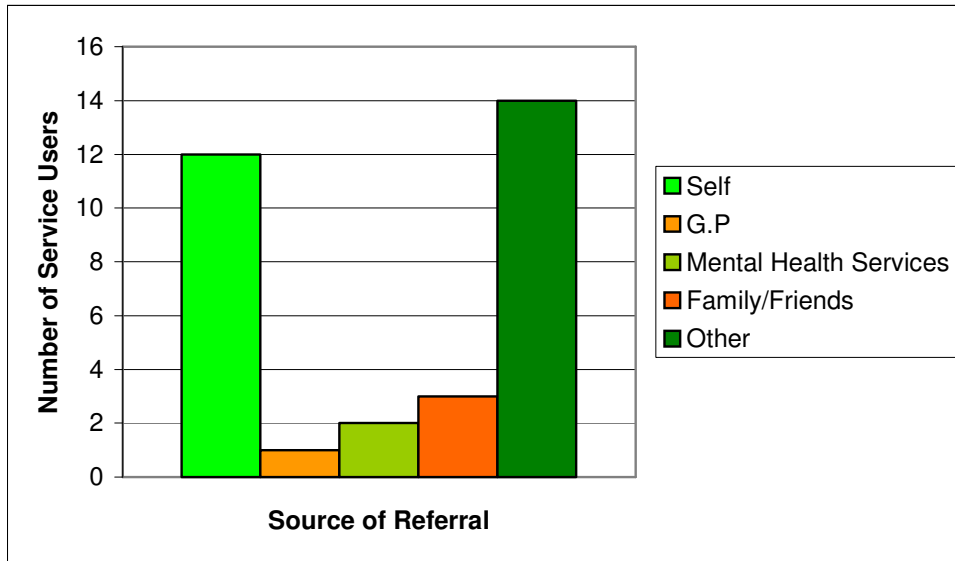


The following graph indicates the length of time service users have accessed support from the Service. It includes both current service users and those who have moved on in the last year. Compared to findings from the previous year, the data shows a decrease in service users requiring support for longer than six months and an increase in service users moving on between three and six months:



Service users continue to make use of the 1:1 support the Service offers although a few still prefer to receive support via email and text. The Service has delivered **354** hours of 1:1 support since April 2008. A number of service users need additional support between 1:1 sessions, usually through phone calls or texts:





Since April 2008 there has been a dramatic increase in referrals from other organisations, ranging from Aberdeen College to Careers Scotland. The second most common referral route is young people contacting the service themselves, although, as with last year, many of them were informed about the service by a G.P, Tutor, or through picking up a leaflet or seeing a poster at various locations such as Aberdeen College, Royal Cornhill Hospital and the Accident and Emergency Department at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. Some young people stated that they had carried out a search on the Internet for self-harm support in Aberdeen and had been led to the service through their search. The variety of referral sources is very encouraging and demonstrates that awareness raising sessions delivered and networking events attended since April 2008 have provided positive results in terms of increasing the profile of the Service.

Activity

Over the last 12 months the Development Worker has continued to attend networking events and deliver awareness raising sessions to a variety of organisations. Consequently, new relationships have been formed with the Social Work Team at Royal Cornhill Hospital, Childline, Drugs Action, Momentum, Rape and Abuse Support, SAMH, Careers Scotland, Aberdeen College and the Deeside Family Centre.

A total of **370** people have taken part in self-harm awareness raising sessions over the last year including workers from the above organisations and students from Aberdeen College. A further figure of approximately **170** people, including pupils from Northfield Academy, students from Robert Gordon University and Aberdeen College (who have contacted the Service in order to obtain information for dissertations and projects) and students attending Health Fairs at Aberdeen College have been given information about the Service. The general feel from participants is that the sessions are very useful and have provided them with the knowledge and confidence to support someone who self-harms. People also commented that it was great to hear about a service they previously did not know about in any detail and how to access it. Some of the comments people wrote in the feedback forms include:

“ Very useful.”

“ Enjoyable session where open discussion was encouraged...”

“ Useful information and practical tips!”

“ Very informative and interactive, the pace was just right.”

“ Excellent session.”

“ Very informative, engaging session.”

The feedback form also asks if there is anything else people would like to have discussed during the session, the vast majority of participants have said no but a few people stated that they would like more case studies demonstrating the process of recovery. This is something the Development Worker is looking into including in future awareness sessions. Other plans for improving awareness raising sessions include incorporating sound bites of service users talking about their experiences of self-harm, what has helped them and what has not helped them. There have been a lot of positive comments in the past about the effectiveness of having a young person included in the sessions and although there are a couple who are very keen to help educate others about self-harm using their own experiences, they may not always be available at the time. So, it makes sense to have a resource that can be used at times when there is no one available to give his or her input. Such a resource would also allow people to hear a variety of different experiences.

Future Plans

The priorities for the coming year, in terms of raising awareness, are to continue to work in partnership with A&E staff in order to ensure young people receive the support they need following an incident of self-harm. The Development Worker is currently working with a former service user on an information booklet for the staff to pass on to patients presenting with self-harm related injuries or self-poisoning. The booklet will hopefully function as both a source of information on the Self-harm Service and how to refer oneself for support while, at the same time, providing practical advice and information on self-harm such as alternative coping strategies and distraction techniques. Further awareness raising sessions are planned for SAMH and the Counselling Diploma students at Aberdeen University.

The Self-harm Service continues to receive a number of enquiries from people out with the 16-25 year old age range and out with Aberdeen City. In the last 12 months there have been a number enquiries from agencies wishing to refer service users for support from the Self-harm Service. Information, advice and support were provided to the agencies concerned but this was limited beyond the initial enquiry due to the constraints of the remit. This means that there are still people unable to use the Service directly. Most of the potential referrals were under 16 or over 25. It is clear that there is a gap in the provision of services for people who self-harm and that future expansion of the Aberdeen Self-Harm Service would benefit a great many more people than it does at present.

Plans are currently being made to provide a Training-for-Trainers course throughout Aberdeenshire in order to equip workers with the necessary tools and knowledge to support people who self-harm. Service users have made very positive comments about the quality of support they receive on a 1:1 basis; therefore the Development Worker will continue to offer the same support.

Service User Feedback

Service users were sent a questionnaire to allow them to comment on the effectiveness of the Service. Here are some of their comments:

“How has the Project Worker helped you to stop self-harming or reduce self-harm? What else can the Service offer you?”

“The Project Worker has been very helpful. I have found Barbara (Development Worker) to be very approachable and really listens to what I have to say. Barbara’s (Development Worker) input has been useful in helping me to deal with my self-harming and has made me think more about why I do it. The techniques Barbara (Development Worker) suggested such as keeping a diary has helped me more to pinpoint when I am feeling down and why.”

“If the project could offer anything else, I’d like it to be in the form of safe cutting kits. I know this is controversial and make look to some as though Penumbra is encouraging self-harm, but that’s like saying needle exchanges encourage IV drug abuse. In other words, it’s stupid. Safe cutting kits would make it safer for people who **have to cut** to do it cleanly and care for wounds afterwards in a sensible manner.”

“What has helped you to control your self-harm?”

“A really helpful thing has been the attitude that Penumbra has to self-harmers, in that they do not regard us as freaks or self-indulgent little idiots. It feels wonderful to be understood for once as someone using (albeit flawed) coping mechanisms as well as one can. Also, not being reprimanded when you **do** cut takes the sting out of one’s need for self-harm. That, in turn, makes it easier to come back and talk again, and sometimes is all you need in order to avoid cutting for a while.”

“Is there anything else you would like to say about the Self-harm Service?”

“Barbara (Development Worker), and by extension Penumbra, has saved my life more than once...I would recommend it to anyone who needs support for their self-harm difficulties. It was an essential service for me at a time in my life when nobody else understood what I was going through, or was prepared to listen. Barbara’s (Development Worker) open attitude and sense of humour, as well as her vast knowledge and sensitive listening skills, makes her a wonderful asset to a very important organisation for young people. Thank you, Barbara, from the bottom of my heart.”

Service User’s Recovery Story

I have been cutting myself since I was 13 years old. As the area I used to live in was quite remote with few services and for fear of my parents finding out there was no support to help me deal with my self-harm. Eventually I managed to build up the confidence to confide in a teacher, this turned out to be a very negative experience and the response “stop being an attention-seeking, immature, little girl” resulted in my self-harm becoming more secretive.

When I moved to university things were very difficult for me and my self-harm worsened. My self-harm escalated from cutting to attempting suicide and taking overdoses. I was in and out of the mental health service for a number of years looking for help and advice about both why I felt the way I did and trying to get help to stop self-harming. Getting the support proved very difficult as I was met with negative attitudes and told I was “attention-seeking” on a number of occasions by various professionals. Those who did realise it was a problem didn’t seem to have an understanding of self-harm or did and were unsure of what they could do to help. Once when I was in the hospital waiting room I spotted a poster for Penumbra and took note of the number. It took me a year to build up the confidence to phone as I had lost hope of anyone being able to help me.

I was very nervous when I did phone but on my first meeting with the support worker I was put at ease. As the support worker was so friendly and enthusiastic as

opposed to negative it didn't seem so scary once I was there. By this time I was self-harming several times a day and had fallen into an episode of depression, which led to my life becoming very stressful. We talked about when I started self-harming, what effects it has on my life both in the long and short-term and both the positives and the negatives. We came up with alternative coping strategies and ways of managing the stress that was aggravating my self-harm. We developed a coping box, fun things to do, activities that could be used as distractions and alternatives to self-harm. I was also encouraged and helped to get back into treatment where I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. I felt supported all the way through and it was great knowing that I had someone I could phone or text when I needed it and no other support was available.

For the first time I felt like I was understood, listened to and wasn't being judged. I think that was what I needed to help me to stop. I knew the theories behind how to stop but I didn't have the encouragement and support to help me. This help and support proved to be the most important thing. Slowly I began to regain control over my self-harming and eventually reduced its occurrence to a point where I only cut myself when I was very stressed and had no other option.

In the year I have spent being supported by the self-harm project I have not only learned to stop self-harming I have also gained confidence and have grown as a person. Now I want to help educate people about self-harm so that they are better placed to help others. I am no longer ashamed that I use it to cope and hopefully there will come a point where I don't do it at all.

The understanding, advice, support and just seeing a friendly face when I needed was better than any professional help I have ever experienced. This was also helped by the non-clinical setting, relaxed attitude and access to much needed cups of coffee and packets of tissues. I am sure that if I had not phoned that day I would still be struggling and now I am so glad that I did and hope that many other people will have access to such an excellent service.

Thank you.

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