

The client knows best

Innovation and progress, customer service winner: Leeds Survivor-Led Crisis Service

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Wednesday December 6, 2006

[The Guardian](#)

Everyone who turns up at the door of the Leeds Survivor-Led Crisis Service on the outskirts of the city has one thing in common: they are at the end of their tether. All will be facing acute mental crisis, ranging from attempted suicide to self-harm and family break-up. And most will already be feeling bruised by their experiences of the statutory services.

What they find at the crisis service is very different. For a start, nearly all the managers, frontline staff and volunteers have experienced mental health problems themselves. Just as importantly, the therapeutic approach they follow is based on the radical notion that the users know what's best for them.

The principle tenets of this philosophy are "unconditional positive regard", "actualisation" and "non-directivity". But, says project manager Fiona Venner, this simply means treating people with warmth, kindness and honesty. "Rather than telling people what to do or giving advice or saying 'I'm the expert', it's very much about supporting people to bring out and develop their inner resources. People ultimately know what's best for them."

So clients will be offered one-to-one support from the team of crisis support workers. They can also take part in the weekly group sessions. But if they simply want to listen to music, have a bath or make a meal in the adjoining kitchen, that's fine too.

"We give people a lot of freedom and choice. Many of the people have not always had a lot of experience of feeling in control in their lives." Venner says.

This freedom even extends to accepting individuals' self-harming, which the team see as a coping mechanism in the face of unbearable distress. Nevertheless, there is a limit to the permissive approach. If someone is judged to be at real risk of suicide, the team will intervene, as they will if they learn about adult or child abuse. But this only happens rarely.

Between 30% and 50% of all clients who come to the service are suicidal, and many have actually tried to take their lives. "But if someone is here, there's always hope," says Venner. "Part of them might want to die, but part of them wants to live and that's the part that's with us."

The service was set up in 1999 as a result of a campaign by users to find an alternative to hospital for people in acute mental health crisis. After initially working in partnership with social services it became an independent charity in 2001, but is still largely funded by the local health trust and social services.

In the last year the numbers attending the service have shot up from fewer than 250 to around 1,000, mainly as a result of the decision to extend the opening hours - now from 6pm to 2am between Friday and Sunday. The service provides a well-used telephone helpline every night from 6pm-10.30pm. There is also a family room for parents in crisis and users are offered a taxi service if required. Importantly, everyone comes of their own volition. Most self-refer, though a few are referred by GPs, A&E or specialist services such as the city's crisis resolution team.

The pattern of attendance varies hugely. Many have very chaotic lives and will return again and again before moving on. Others will turn up once and that will be enough. Sadly, high demand means many have to be turned away, so visitors are prioritised according to their level of desperation and isolation. "If they're in a hostel or have friends or family, they may be safer than someone who's completely on their own. But," Venner adds, "there is a huge amount of unmet need."

She has no doubt the service has kept many people out of hospital and gives them safety and sanctuary when they are at their lowest ebb. "People often say to us: I would be dead if you hadn't been there," she observes.

Despite the volatile nature of many people's problems, there has not been a single violent incident in the service's seven-year history, says Venner. "People love the service and are very respectful of it and don't want to jeopardise it. The fact that we provide genuine kindness, warmth, affection and respect seems to mark us out as different from other services."

Innovation and progress, customer service award

Sponsor: Lorien

Winner: Leeds Survivor-Led Crisis Service

For compassionate, one-to-one support for those undergoing acute mental health problems

Runners-up:

St Christopher's Fellowship For its scheme in which service-users are consulted and involved in the development of the organisation

Uttlesford district council, Essex For instigating the restoration of the Bridge End Garden, creating a safe community space