

Using a counselling skills approach to engaging young people with mental health problems

Supporting young people with mental health problems is one of the critical issues for Trusted Professionals. Declan Harrigan, Trusted Professional for young people participating in Activity Agreements through West Lothian Council, shares his counselling skills approach to engaging one young person with mental health problems.



For me, mental health is a growing concern, with a good 70% plus of my caseload presenting with mental health issues. As a trained counsellor it's a real advantage being able to draw on these skills to support young people through my key worker role with West Lothian Council. However, there are aspects of counselling skills that any Trusted Professional could use as part of their role.

'B'

B was referred to me by Skills Development Scotland. He was affected by mental health issues and was on medication for anxiety and depression. He presented with having low confidence and self-esteem and conversation was minimal.

Being able to overcome his barriers was crucial to B's ability to participate in activities and learning that would help him identify and achieve his goals.

I started working with B by doing a lot of 1-2-1 work to build a non-judgemental, empathic and genuine relationship. It became evident that if he was to trust me as a worker I would have to show him that I trusted him as equally. After a few sessions of basically silence I felt that it was time to engage in some self-disclosure, to demonstrate to B that I trusted him. This evened the playing field so to speak, showing him that trusted professionals can and have experienced some of the same things as the young people we work with on a daily basis. This was the turning point in our relationship – he now knew I

trusted him - enough to speak about something personal to me that he could relate to.

It is important that the worker be very self-aware if doing something like this and not get too emotionally engaged in what they're telling the young person. Only disclose something you are comfortable with and nothing too deep, it will still have the same affect. Recognise your limits and that this is about using the counselling skills approach of being genuine, present, person-centred and non-judgemental, not engaging in professional counselling.

B then began to disclose more about himself to me, starting with small things but over a few weeks telling me that he had thought about suicide in the past. We talked about this and how it felt, if he had made a plan and if so what he would do.

Through the whole process of our 1-2-1 work a lot of counselling approaches were used, starting off with a purely person-centred approach to some cognitive behavioural work to look at 'faulty thinking' and some systemic work looking at the family, the dynamics and how it made him feel etc.

Trusted Professionals could incorporate aspects of the person-centred approach into their work with young people. This involves active listening, open ended questions, allowing the person to reflect on their own experiences and have control of the session to a certain extent (this is their time not yours), reflective listening, being non-judgemental and present. The importance of the right body language, tone of voice and eye contact cannot be underestimated. Specifically with young people they are very in tune to when someone is actually listening to them and when they are 'just another worker'. Young people use this broad term when they have had multiple workers and feel that you are no different and will not help them. An immediate defence / guard will come up. Also, the small things we say go a long way. During the first meeting I feel it makes a difference to refer to the young person as a young man or woman and not a child. This also gives them the feeling of maturity and immediately will show you a mutual respect.

B also began getting support from a counsellor as part of his Activity Agreement. This seemed to make a big difference to his progression and

movement forward and helped B focus on his employability needs during our one-to-one sessions.

I gradually supported B to identify activities that he enjoyed. He spoke about how he used to go to the gym with his mum. I wanted to give him a bit of independence so I suggested that I could get him gym membership as part of his Activity Agreement and go with him, initially, instead of him going with his mum which he was happy with.

B began to get a little more confident with social interaction and initiating conversations. As a result I suggested that we look at him going to some of the Helping Young People Engage (HYPE) courses as he expressed an interest in media and photography. B began attending the courses regularly and really enjoying them. He found his interest and began to even support other young people on the group through their activities.

It was made clear by the workers and co-ordinators of the groups that B was attending that he had a real skill and passion for the media and photography work so they talked about him coming back to the next course but in more of a mentoring capacity for other young people. B did this and really excelled again in his skills and the support he gave to other young people in the group. He became a pivotal member of the group and how it ran.

Outside of the groups, B and his two friends had written a short film. They directed, produced and filmed it for one of the Edinburgh festival shows and it had a screening in front of other professionals from the industry.

B's confidence in his ability to do these types of things has really surpassed anything I would have thought from our first meeting.

After this we talked about the possibility of college and looked for courses that he might be interested in. We applied for ILA for him to do a part-time screen writing course. He also identified an HNC course in creative media which he was interested in but the interviews had already begun. We contacted the college and based on his previous work on HYPE and his short film work, they agreed to meet with him for the course even though he hadn't all the entry requirements.

B was invited to the final stages of the interviews and also had to submit a written piece as he hadn't all the entry requirements. B did exceptionally well and received word the next day that he was successful and had done an excellent interview and written piece. B is delighted with the outcome and so is his Mum who has been so supportive of his work through the Activity Agreement. B now starts college at the end of August 2015 and is really looking forward to the new challenge.

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September 2015