Is the befriending service at York and District Mind meeting the needs and expectations of the service users?

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Date: 13th May 2011
Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to explore the question ‘is the befriending service at York and District Mind meeting the needs and expectations of the service user?’ The dissertation first examines the effects of mental ill-health and the goals of and approaches to befriending in order to establish a context for the York and District Mind (YDM) befriending service. The qualitative element of the study interviews four YDM befriending service users and gives voice to their experiences within the framework of mental ill-health and befriending as reflected in current literature. The dissertation concludes by considering the limitations of the study, the implications of the findings and makes recommendations on behalf of the service users.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank York and District Mind for giving me the opportunity to embark on this research study. My thanks also to the service users who participated, the befriending co-ordinators for taking the time to answer my questions, particularly Liz Pycroft for her support and faith in me and also Dr Hazel James for her time and advice.

Finally to my husband, for his endless patience in reading and re-reading my drafts and for his unwavering support and guidance throughout the dissertation process.
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1. Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to elucidate on the approach and findings of the critical study which explores the question 'Is the befriending service at York and District Mind meeting the needs and expectations of the service users?'

At the time of writing York and District Mind (YDM) have been operating their lottery funded befriending service in the York area for approximately three years. The purpose of the befriending service, as explained in their lottery funding application, is to provide emotional and practical support to adults whose experience of mental health difficulties or emotional distress has left them feeling socially isolated or excluded. This support is provided by volunteer befrienders who are matched with individuals with a view to developing a caring and supportive relationship. The befriender’s role is to model good social relationships as well as enabling their ‘friend’ to become more involved in the community through a range of social activities (York and District Mind, 2011).

The YDM service was implemented in 2008 following an initiative piloted by Scarborough, Whitby and Ryedale Mind. The pilot was devised utilising ‘The Circle of Friends’ approach (Perske, 1998) and subsequent research undertaken by Brandon and Morris in 2002 into the role of mental health support workers in the East Suffolk area. The Circle of Friends approach to reducing isolation was first developed for use in the disability sector in the USA and Canada but has subsequently been adopted and applied to a range of supportive environments. The approach emphasises the importance and value of simple friendships. Perske maintains that:

A good friendship can become a living document... it doesn’t matter whether society has imaged us as so-called normal or as a person with a disability.

1 During the period of the critical study YDM and Our Celebration have merged. As the service users interviewed were providing commentary on the YDM befriending service prior to the merger and in the interest of simplicity this paper will only make reference to YDM and the YDM befriending service.
good friendships can inspire us to try refreshing new interpersonal activities in our own lives - things we have never done before (1998, p. 13).

In order to position this study in the wider context it is worth noting that the effects of isolation and exclusion are not limited to the field of mental health having been shown to have an impact on an individual's overall health.

Social relationships or the relative lack thereof, constitute a major risk factor for health – rivalling the effect of well established health risk factors such as cigarette smoking, blood pressure...obesity and physical activity. (House, Landis and Umberson cited Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton, 2010, p. 2)

Given these significant health implications, which in the context of the NHS present government spending implications, it is pleasing to make reference to the extensive study into Befriending and Mentoring undertaken by The Befriending Network Scotland in partnership with Scottish Mentoring Network in April 2005 where 277 befriending and mentoring projects were assessed. The results showed that 'the supportive relationships [that they initiate] achieve outcomes relating to increases in confidence, self-esteem and a reduction in isolation' (2005, p. 4).

The government's introduction of the Big Society initiative in 2010 claims to be concerned with 'empowering individuals and communities, encouraging social responsibility and creating an enabling and accountable state' (Big Society Network, 2011). Somewhat counter-intuitively this means that national and local governments’ funding is being reduced which in turn could affect YDM who are competing with other charitable organisations who obtain funding from The Big Lottery and York Council. With this in mind I trust that this research, when combined with other data provided by YDM, will support YDM’s applications for longer term and more secure funding.

When the befriending model is applied to the specific area of mental health in the UK there are only a small number of accessible studies to validate whether the same positive results as those published by The Befriending Network Scotland apply. Whilst YDM have some evidence that points towards the success of their service
they do not have the resources to undertake a study of this nature on a regular basis. This creates an opportunity for this study to measure the efficacy of the service that YDM offer and YDM are eager to obtain thoroughly researched information that reflects the views of the service users. To this end the study has undertaken a qualitative review with a subset of the YDM befriending service users to answer the critical study question posed.

On a personal level I have enjoyed the challenge and reward that being a volunteer befriender at YDM presents for the past three years. I have been at the ‘business end’ of the befriending service, from the challenges of dealing with late night ‘I want to commit suicide’ phone calls to the rewards of seeing my friend take her first trip to the cinema in ten years. I am passionate about the service that YDM offer and therefore the optimal outcome of the study will be the identification of any areas where the befriending service might be enhanced to exceed the expectations of the service user.

Finally, I hope that this study might also be used to raise awareness of the value of befriending to the service users for both current and prospective volunteers and assist in formalising the link between YDM and York St John University to create a recognised placement for counselling students. Undertaking my placement for the past three years at YDM has presented significant opportunities to enhance existing and learn new skills as a volunteer befriender.

There are a number of terms used in this document which may be open to interpretation or which may be considered to be jargon. In the interests of clarity the usage of the terms will now be defined.

- Service user - an individual who utilises a befriending service.
- Befriender - the individuals who carry out the befriending role.
- Befriending co-ordinators - the team at YDM who support the service users and befrienders.
- The service users who participated in the research will, in the interests of anonymity be referred to as SU1, SU2, SU3 and SU4.
2. Literature Review

Given the limited scope of study that can be covered by a single novice researcher and to place this study in context it is necessary to identify related literature and to make use of information produced by previous studies. To this end the following sections will demonstrate the approach to sourcing and present the material.

2.1 Research

As the main focus of this study is to explore befriending as practised by YDM, who offer the service for individuals struggling with mental ill-health, an exhaustive systematic internet search was conducted to source literature related to befriending in mental health. The main websites that were referenced initially were the Befriending Network Scotland, The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, Mental Health Foundation, Mind, York and District Mind and The Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

In order to ensure a balanced view a database search of the Academic Onefile (Infotrac), PsycARTICLES and PsycINFO databases and a manual search of journals was undertaken at the York St John University library. The initial inclusion criterion for the search was ‘befriending and mental health’, but this was subsequently extended due to limited mental health befriending studies being identified.

In response to the early literature searches a ‘snowball sampling’ (Aveyard, 2010) approach followed and this included searches for ‘mentoring’, ‘social isolation’, ‘loneliness’, ‘friendship’ and ‘relationships’. This resulted in material being identified from the Journal of Public Mental Health, The British Journal of Psychiatry and the Journal of Mental Health. Use of www.scholargoogle.co.uk uncovered two qualitative studies that could not be accessed immediately but following contact with the authors both kindly provided copies of their research.

It is acknowledged that many of the organisations from which the material has been sourced have a vested interest in befriending and the material obtained was
reviewed with this in mind. To ensure that the articles, meta-analyses, qualitative studies and case studies obtained provided the appropriate level of information quality, each was assessed using the PROMPT (Presentation, relevance, objectivity, method, provenance and timeliness) checklist (Open University, 2011).

### 2.2 The case for befriending in the area of mental health

Mental ill-health does not discriminate - it can affect anyone of any age. For those affected it can be a frustrating, confusing and frightening time. Mental ill-health can affect a person’s quality of life and have an impact on relationships, work, self-esteem and confidence (Mind, 2011). Mental ill-health can be particularly isolating where those affected can feel lonely and ashamed often as a result of perceived or actual stigma and social exclusion (Mitchell and Pistrang, 2010; Cambeull, 2010). Throughout the research process, there are two key themes that have emerged consistently from the literature as being significant to the well-being of people struggling with mental ill-health: reducing social isolation and providing a supportive relationship which may be considered to be two sides of the same coin.

#### 2.2.1 Social isolation

Perese and Wolf (2005) suggest that the lack of social support experienced by people with mental health difficulties is indicative of the small number of people in their social network. Whereas the average person has a social network of approximately forty people, individuals with mental health difficulties typically have between four and thirteen people. The majority of these relationships tend to be characterised by a patient/carer bias rather than an equal-status friendship. Their social network is often made up of fewer family members than the norm with more mental health professionals. For those affected by mental ill health, ‘The hours of the day stretch with no place to go to be with people’ (Peterson cited Perese and Wolf, 2005, p. 594).

A significant body of the literature sourced supports the notion that social isolation and loneliness is increasing in British society and is having a devastating impact on our mental health (Pilgrim, Rogers and Pescosolido, 2011; Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton, 2010; Griffin, 2010; Cacioppo, 2008; Layard, 2006). Whilst the reasons for the increase in loneliness are outside the scope of this study, combating social
isolation is one of the key areas of focus for befriending projects.


Despite the evidence indicating that a lack of social relationships contributes as much to incidents of ill-health as smoking and alcohol consumption, and even exceeds the impact of physical inactivity and obesity, this fact is not widely recognised by health organisations or the public (Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton, 2010).

2.2.2 Supportive relationships

A caring, non-judgemental relationship such as a friendship - ranging from providing practical and emotional support to simply ‘being there’ (Mental Health Foundation, 2007) - has been identified as crucial for people experiencing mental health difficulties.

A survey carried out into the importance of friendship by the Mental Health Foundation found that people experiencing mental health problems have a fear of being rejected if they disclose their mental health problems due to the stigma associated with mental ill-health. This sentiment is echoed by Freeth (2007) and Pilgrim, Rogers and Pescosolido (2010, p. 516) suggesting that social interactions are not always positive and can, in fact, be harmful and negative; ‘Networks can integrate individuals into a community and, just as powerfully, isolate individuals...’.

Perese and Wolf (2005) put forward that people with severe mental difficulties often do not know how to make or keep friends. They suggest that establishing and maintaining relationships requires learned and complex skills that may be lost to someone experiencing mental health difficulties through factors such as ‘disruption of relationships, lack of a partner or a social network, poverty, lack of transportation, problematic living situations, and lack of opportunities for social interaction’ (Perese and Wolf 2005, p. 593).
The residual effects of mental ill-health such as ‘psychotic symptoms...impaired ability to tolerate stress, lack of motivation, and a diminished ability to initiate new behaviours...’ (Perese and Wolf 2005, p. 593) may also contribute to a person’s inability to carry out more complex social interaction skills.

Attachment theory suggests that how we relate to others is impacted by our ‘internal working model’ that is, our ‘environmental’ model that tells us about the world and the ‘organismal’ model that tells us about ourselves in relation to the world. This can be likened to a map that we carry around which tells us about ourselves, others and how we relate (Holmes, 1993). If this map becomes distorted it can make the replication of forming and maintaining relationships more difficult.

2.2.3 Befriending: reducing isolation and providing a supportive relationship

One of the ways of improving mental health is to foster a supportive relationship, for example, through befriending (Mitchell and Pistrang, 2010; Mead et al, 2010; Butterworth and Berry, 2004; Hollway and Mawhinney, 2002; Kingdon et al, 1989). It has also been suggested that individuals may benefit from social interventions that do not medicalise an individual’s difficulties, an approach which befriending in general, and YDM in particular, support (Mead et al, 2010; Kingdon 1989).

Studies show that befriending is an effective way of increasing self-esteem and confidence and reducing isolation for the service user (Parsons and Dixon, 2004; Nicholson and Thomas, 2003; Hollway and Mawhinney 2002; Dean and Goodlad, 1998). Studies have also demonstrated that befriending can be an effective way of reducing occurrences of depression for the service user (Harris, Brown and Robinson, 1999 cited Mead et al, 2010).

Perese and Wolf (2005) suggest that training befrienders and matching them with service users provides the service user with ‘ready made’ or ‘intentional’ friends (Pilgrim et al, 2011) that model the skills required to make and establish friendships.
2.3 What is befriending?

Now that the case for befriending has been established it is worth assessing how befriending is defined in literature:

Befriending can be described as a supportive and reliable relationship for individuals who are experiencing social isolation or who are in need of additional social support (Mead et al, 2010; Mitchell and Pistrang, 2010; Perese and Wolf, 2005; Parsons and Dixon, 2004; Nicholson and Thomas, 2003). Befriending is offered within a number of client groups; the elderly, individuals with learning or physical disabilities, youth offending and individuals who are experiencing mental health difficulties to name but a few. Befriending has been promoted as a way to address the lack of support and to reduce the isolation felt by individuals in the above client sectors (Dean and Goodlad 1998). The most commonly used definition of befriending within the literature sourced was;

*a relationship between two or more individuals which is initiated, supported, and monitored by an agency that has defined one or more parties as likely to benefit. Ideally the relationship is non-judgemental, mutual, purposeful, and there is a commitment over time (Dean and Goodlad 1998: 26).*

2.3.1 Befriending models

The implementation of befriending is approached differently by organisations; they may employ a person-centred versus a goal-oriented approach, they make seek to adopt an approach that is time-limited or open-ended. At a practical level the frequency and length of meeting, and the time and location of meetings can be dependent on the approach or befriender availability and a befriender can be a paid professional or volunteer (Mitchell and Pistrang, 2010; Nicholson and Thomas, 2003).

The difference in the models employed raises a number of questions regarding the specific nature of the befriending relationship which will help to frame the YDM approach and provide a point of reference when assessing the findings of the service user interviews.
BefriENDING services are provided either by paid workers or non-professional volunteers who are trained and matched with service users (Mead et al, 2010). There is some debate as to whether paid workers or non-professional volunteers provide the optimal outcome but this can be argued to be dependent on the specific aim and environment of the befriending relationship.

Some organisations have chosen to implement befriending in a non-directive way and follow a person-centred approach where the focus is on the relationship. The philosophy behind a person-centred approach is that the provision of the relationship is enough to bring about positive change and does not require the befriender to set goals to challenge the service user. ‘What is healing is to be in a relationship in which the self is fully accepted and valued...’ (McLeod, 2003, p. 166).

The person-centred approach is usually characterised by being an open-ended relationship, that is, one where a fixed duration to the relationship is not imposed.

 Conversely, the goal-oriented approach to befriending seeks to set specific and measurable goals for the service user. In the words of Egan (2007, p. 9) ‘Possibilities need to be turned into goals because helping is about solutions and outcomes...this then constitutes his or her agenda for change’. This approach is typically characterised by the relationship being assigned a fixed duration.

2.4 YDM’s implementation of befriending

At YDM the approach to befriending follows the person-centred paradigm with the belief that the power of the relationship is healing. The relationship is not time-limited and befrienders are unpaid volunteers.

The befriending service does not exist in isolation at YDM; ‘The Whole System’ Approach has been adopted which;

...places the person being supported at the centre of a range of appropriate services and opportunities and matches available facilities/resources with their unique, expresses, wants and needs (York and District Mind, 2011).
Through this Whole System approach service users have access to the full range of YDM services including befriending, carers’ counselling, advocacy and the opportunity to attend various support meetings such as creative writing and a bipolar support group.

3. Methodology and Design

Having considered the case for, and models of befriending, the focus now turns to the methods by which this study seeks to discover and present the service users’ experience of the YDM befriending service.

In order for the reader to assess the validity of the findings of this study it is important to understand the method of research and analysis employed, the selection criteria, the participants, the practicalities, problems, and ethical considerations encountered during the study.

The aim of qualitative research is to generate understanding and insight into the situation being researched (Aveyard, 2010). The qualitative approach therefore was deemed the most appropriate for this study when seeking to explore the perceptions of the service user and to understand their ‘lived’ experience (Saks and Allsop, 2007, Pope and Mays, 2001).

Although qualitative research is not always categorised further the researcher has sought to identify and recognise that to provide the best answer to the critical study question a phenomenological approach was best suited.

Whilst the value of categorising the qualitative approach as phenomenological may at first be dismissed as irrelevant the reason for doing so is that in a phenomenological study the research topic ‘is studied from the point of view of the research participant’ (Aveyard, 2010, p. 59). This definition clearly reflects the intention of the researcher from the outset – to be able to give the service users a ‘voice’ something which society does not always afford to those affected by mental ill-health.
3.1 Selection criteria

The befriending service at YDM is run by three paid befriending co-ordinators, there are 55 current matches and 40 potential service users on the waiting list. In order to select archetypal users of the service, a purposive sampling method (Walliman, 2004) was chosen whereby participants were selected, not at random, but on the basis of their exposure to the service in question.

As the focus for this study extends only to the users of the YDM befriending service the befriender volunteers and users of other YDM services were specifically excluded from the selection process.

There was no selection criteria set on the service users’ sex, ethnicity, age or the length of the befriending relationship.

Although deemed to be of low-risk, consideration was given to the personal safety of the researcher during selection. The befriending co-ordinators identified suitable candidates and provided some guidance on suitability to interview at the YDM offices or at the service users’ home, thereby adhering to the principle of ‘self-care and respect’ (BACP, 2011).

In order to adhere to the BACP ethical principle of ‘beneficence’ (BACP, 2011) it was important that the research was committed to the service users’ well-being. For this reason YDM were asked to identify candidate service user nominations who they felt would be comfortable engaging in the process. This defined the primary selection criterion; that the nominated service users would be comfortable engaging in personal interviews. By definition this criteria was understood to exclude service users who were experiencing severe cognitive disruption which could limit their ability to reflect on their befriending service experience (Mitchell and Pistrang, 2010).
3.2 Participants

Due to the complex needs and vulnerability of the service users the three befriending co-ordinators were asked to identify three service users each as potential candidates. The initial engagement with the service users needed to be approached sensitively so it was agreed with YDM that the befriending co-ordinators would approach the service users selected to explain the purpose of the study and prepare them for contact by the researcher.

In order to reduce the potential for bias as a result of the befriending co-ordinator nominations, the intention was that one individual from the three nominated would be selected by the researcher from each befriending co-ordinator pool to take part in the interviews. During the review of nominated candidates it was discovered that one candidates’ befriender was a student peer of the researcher and as such the decision was taken to exclude the candidate from the study.

There was some difficulty contacting and securing commitment from the nominated service users and as a result the befriending co-ordinators were asked to provide an additional nomination each. Although three services users agreed to take part in the research on the day of the scheduled interview one service user did not feel well enough to take part. It was therefore necessary to contact further service users and the end result was that the interview pool was extended to four service users (Appendix 1).

The table below shows information about the four service users who were interviewed. Traditionally the first column of the table would identify the service user (SU1-4) albeit anonymously. Given that the befriending co-ordinators nominated the candidates and with a small participant pool this would potentially enable identification and attribution of comments to the service user. As this would be in contravention of the assurances provided to the service users in the consent form the decision has been taken to omit this information from the table.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Approx Age</th>
<th>Mental Health</th>
<th>Length of relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>1-1.5 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Self Harm</td>
<td>1-1.5 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>&lt;1 yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Addiction/Schizophrenia</td>
<td>1-1.5 yrs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Service user information*

Of the four service users interviewed, three were referred by mental health professionals and one self-referred having heard of the service via ‘word-of-mouth’. Service users received no remuneration for taking part in the study.

### 3.3 Procedures

Ethical approval for the study was provided by the Ethics Committee Board at York St John University following the submission of a research proposal.

Whilst it is acknowledged that YDM, the service users and the researcher have pre-conceived ideas regarding the service it was essential that this study was presented impartially by the researcher. In the same vein working with YDM to produce the study was a fantastic opportunity but it was vital that the research was not unduly influenced by YDM so that this paper could provide an objective and independent review, maintaining the integrity of the research (Ford, 2006). To this end a project contract was drawn up with YDM and is included for reference as Appendix 2.

Initially, it was thought that to put the needs and expectations of the service user in perspective it would be necessary to fully understand the objectives that YDM sets out to achieve and the processes by which they expect to realise them. This led to the researcher mapping the befriending service processes and producing structured interview questions based on the phases and stages of the befriending lifecycle (Appendix 3). Although a significant amount of effort was expended interviewing befriending co-ordinators and producing a Microsoft Visio® diagram of the befriending process this ultimately was not used for the study (Appendix 4).
Following a review of the initial structured questions and the Visio diagram with university and YDM staff it was felt that this approach could be overwhelming for the service users and instead an unstructured interviewing approach was recommended.

In order to consider self-reflexivity I maintained a journal throughout the critical study in which I documented my personal motivation, emotions, biases, theory and emotional reactions (Dallos and Vetere, 2005). On reviewing the journal I realised that I felt more comfortable with structured questions as a result of feeling insecure about my own abilities. Being a novice researcher I was concerned about not being able to obtain enough data if the service user was not comfortable talking about their experiences. I also felt vulnerable not having specific questions to focus on in the interview and the thought of undertaking an organic and evolving interview initially made me feel uneasy. I decided to discuss these concerns with my supervisor at YDM and she encouraged me to trust in my ability to form relationships and display empathy whilst employing active listening skills to facilitate the interviews.

I undertook further research into unstructured interviews and came to understand that unstructured interviews, despite the name, were not totally without structure (typically being informed by a research question) but rather followed an approach where the interview was as open-ended and non-directive as possible (Saks and Allsop, 2007).

I found this interview approach congruent with the phenomenological qualitative approach chosen and realised the power and flexibility that an unstructured interview would provide for the service user. It would give them the power and control over what they chose to talk about. Despite the insecurity I initially felt with less structure, as an individual my values and attitudes strongly advocate service users’ autonomy (BACP, 2011) which the non-directive and open-ended questions would uphold.

Another area where the study deviated from the general approach was that the intention had been to prepare documentation regarding the study and send it to the service users prior to the interview. Following the discussion about structure and concerns about overwhelming the service users the decision was taken not to produce this material. Instead, the only formal documentation presented to the
service user was the letter of consent which was explained to the service user at the beginning of the interview (Appendix 5). This proved to be the correct approach as none of the service users had participated in research before, they felt nervous and seemed anxious when confronted with paperwork.

3.4 Interviews

At the outset of the interview it was important to acknowledge that the service users might be reluctant to provide negative feedback for fear of jeopardising their befriending relationship. Whilst explaining the consent form, it was re-iterated that the results of the study would be anonymised and that comments would not be attributable to them. The service users were also assured of their right to be self-governing maintaining the BACP principle of ‘autonomy’ (BACP, 2011).

Particular care was taken during the interviews to ensure that the service user was put at ease within a safe environment and that open questions were used, empathy was conveyed and that active listening, reflection and gentle and appropriate monitoring was employed to maintain the flow of the conversation (McLeod, 2003). ‘The main instrument a researcher possesses is his or her capacity to enter in an empathic way, the lived experience of the person or group being studied’ (McLeod, 2003, p. 85). A Dictaphone was used to capture the interview so that the skills required to support the service user could be carried out effectively unhindered by note taking.

Feedback received in response to the research proposal suggested that additional support avenues should be identified to the service users on the basis that there might be elements of the interview that they felt reluctant to talk to their befrienders about. A contact sheet of useful national and local support line numbers was produced (Appendix 6) and at the end of each interview the service user was asked how they were feeling, what support they had available, how accessible the support was and whether they were experiencing any difficult emotions as a result of taking part in the interview. Based on the service users responses the support contact sheet was made available to two of the service users.
The main themes covered during the service user interviews were: (1) Background to the befriending relationship (how the service user heard about and why they joined the service); (2) The befriending relationship (the befriender, the relationship and activities); (3) The service users’ experience of the befriending relationship and recommendations.

3.5 Analysis

Essentially, the first step in the thematic analysis process took place during both the literature review and the interviews themselves. This was further developed during the process of transcribing the interviews from the original audio.

Within each transcript key words were initially highlighted, following which emerging themes were grouped by annotating transcripts and linking text using brackets in the margin (Gibbs, 2007). Once this was complete, each block of text from the service user was checked to ensure that all data had been captured. Following this a mind map approach was used to further assist with the categorisation.

Gibson and Brown (2009) refer to three general sets of aims within thematic analysis; to examine commonalities, examine differences and examine the relationships between elements in the analysis. A criticism of thematic analysis is that by generalising the data into themes the potential exists to lose the specifics of the ‘lived experience’. In order to adhere to the already stated aims of providing a voice for the service users the detail of their feedback has not been diluted through categorisation into themes and the findings have purposefully been presented as fully and faithfully as possible for this reason.

The data captured has been stored on a password protected home computer and the transcriptions stored in a locked cabinet. As every effort has been made to maintain service user anonymity the transcriptions have not been included in the appendices to this paper. The transcriptions will be retained for a short period should they be requested by appropriately authorised university personnel but will be destroyed on completion of the study in accordance with the consent form and as explained to the service users.
4. Findings

Before presenting the findings of the study it is considered beneficial for the reader to have an understanding of the YDM befriending lifecycle at a practical level as this will serve to provide context for the service user feedback. The YDM befriending lifecycle starts when befriending co-ordinators are introduced to service users through referrals from the individual, carers, relatives, mental health services, other support networks or General Practitioners. The befriending co-ordinators then meet with the service user, perform a risk assessment and evaluate the individual’s suitability for the service. Volunteer befrienders, who have gone through an interview process and an intensive four week training course, are matched with the service user that the befriending co-ordinators think appropriate – matches are typically made according to interests and location.

The findings have been arranged into four themes; introduction to the service, isolation, the relationship and the service user’s experience.

4.1 Introduction to the service

At this point it is worth reflecting on the purpose of the study which is to evaluate whether the befriending service at York and District Mind [is] meeting the needs and expectations of the service users? In order to answer this question it is relevant to understand what it was that prompted the service users to join the service in the first place. The quotes below show the service users’ thoughts on what prompted them to join the service.

I have quite a lot of difficulty mixing with people, fitting in and friends and that was one of my main issues...just need someone I can talk normally with... (SU1).

With me illness I seem to struggle on Saturdays and Sundays....would not know what to do on a Saturday a few years back went for a walk to the walls to throw myself off (SU2).
It was somebody to do things with that I could not do on my own... it was someone really who was able to keep an eye on my mental health... (SU3).

I had isolation problems and I would do things on my own and I would find that difficult so I were looking for some sort of friend who could do and would be prepared to do social activities with myself. And I realised my illness was affecting me quite badly (SU4).

4.2 Social isolation

Three service users expressed spending a lot of time on their own and one has over the course of the last few years built up a reliable support network. The reality of the isolation faced by the service users is brought home in the following;

I have not met very many people because I have stopped myself doing it because of all the experiences I have had... I prevent myself from going into relationships (SU1).

...sometimes like say, last Monday when I get bullied at work just when I get home, stay in my bedroom, just think get away from this cruel world (SU2).

I tend to stay home or shut myself away... I think I am not worth it and that is the hardest part about it... my self image is not good and my worthless feelings not good... I tend to go to bed early on a night and take my medication and switch off depressed (SU4).

Since joining the befriending service, all four service users expressed enjoying the time they spent with their befriender and activities varied according to their interests. Activities with befrienders included, going for walks, having coffee, going shopping, trips to the coast, watching TV, having a meal, going to the cinema or museum and playing pool, darts or snooker.
4.3 The supportive relationship

There was a strong sense throughout the four interviews that the emotional support provided by their befriender was valuable to them. Within that support, qualities that emerged as important for service users were those of listening, being non-judgemental and 'just' being able to spend time together.

[my befriender] is there when I need someone to talk to... I have not really had a lot of friendships in that way. And it is good just to not have to think about what to say... [my befriender] has more of an understanding... I can talk normally... do normal things... it makes me go out and face the world again because I have had that break away (SU1).

... have a good talk to [my befriender] get my mind off things... sometimes I get a bit bored and depressed in myself but sometimes [my befriender] makes it disappear (SU2).

Just knowing that there is somebody there that I can talk to... Really just tell [my befriender] how I was really feeling... nice to have somebody who I did not feel I had to be cagey with or choose my words... just to sort of let some steam off and tell [my befriender] it was getting to me was good... [my befriender] took me as I was... [my befriender] has always been supportive... it is really positive... [my befriender] did not judge me... and not to be judged straight away was really nice (SU3).

It is something I look forward to and it is quality time... And it is time spent usefully you know, it is only an hour but it is quality and it is time I look forward to... [my befriender] listens to what I say... understands and I sometimes talk to [my befriender] about problems I have... I confide in [my befriender]... I sometimes tell [my befriender] how I am feeling because you know I feel really bad about myself (SU4).

All service users recalled some discomfort and anxiety at the initial meeting with their befriender. A further suggestion by SU1 was that service users be given the
opportunity to have reviews with befriending co-ordinators on their own within the initial stages of the befriending relationship to be able to express emotions without worrying that they might offend their befriender.

‘I knew I could contact [the befriending co-ordinator] if I needed to but never really had an individual sit down...in the first stages...maybe the first three months would have been helpful...focus is on volunteers coping rather than how I feel about it... Although I know [Mind] care I think they sort of leave me with [my befriender]...but no in-between’ (SU1).

Despite early anxieties, it became clear during the interviews that the service users consider the friendship to be ‘real’ rather than a service provided by an agency.

...two way friendship...like a real relationship... (SU1).

...I know I have a good friend in [my befriender] (SU2).

...it is a nice friendship now...we just get on really well...me and [my befriender] are staying friends whatever happens from here on in (SU3).

...like a friend on a regular basis... I just have him down as a friend... (SU4).

SU1 expressed initial concerns about a volunteer befriender being ‘matched’ with the service user and voiced a concern that the person was a volunteer and therefore was obliged to be their friend. Despite these initial concerns they went on to say;

‘...it was a good doorway into it although originally I honestly didn’t think it was going to work...but you know it was surprising how it did affect other areas [of life] I could not see how it would work to form a friendship with somebody...but it is amazing how it did work’ (SU1.)

4.4 The service user experience

4.4.1 Waiting time
Of the four service users interviewed, three felt that there was a long waiting period between being assessed to determine their suitability to join the service and being matched with a befriender. Conversely one service user had a wait of less than two
weeks. SU1 expressed the desire to have had more contact with YDM during the period between being assessed and being matched with a volunteer.

...on the waiting list for quite a while whilst they matched me up with the person I have got now... I think having more contact to say you are still actually on the waiting list because it was left quite a long time... (SU1).

I did have to wait an awfully long time...even though you had to wait a long time I understood why you had to wait...it came at the right time...it was a really difficult time (SU3).

I had to wait quite a long time cause they had to find somebody suitable...over 12 months (SU4).

4.4.2 Joint reviews
Joint reviews are held with befriending co-ordinators, service users and befrienders. The purpose of the reviews are to provide an opportunity for service users and befrienders to be able to reflect on their relationship within a supportive environment, express any concerns and discuss what further activities they would like to do. All four service users felt that joint reviews were arranged on an ad-hoc basis and were happy with this approach. The service users had different opinions on attending the reviews.

Seems to be every 3 or 4 months but I do not know whether there is a set time or not or if the [befriending co-ordinator] just decides to do one (SU1).

Got a meeting coming up sometime. Not made an appointment yet but have a meeting coming up with [befriending co-ordinator] this year or next year depends when you like doing it (SU2).

We have not had that many so we have pretty much been left to our own devices (SU3).
They were positive. They were always positive because there were always extra things we were looking to do and we were looking at more things to do and places we could go...we was looking at expanding...so it worked really well... It gave me feedback. You know feedback made me think about the positives of the service (SU4).

SU1 felt that joint reviews were awkward and struggled with the perceived need to ‘say something profound’. Despite this SU1 expressed an understanding that reviews would be important should a problem arise and also an understanding that the organisation may have a need to monitor friendships. On discussing this issue further SU1 said;

‘I think maybe the reason I feel uncomfortable is that because I don’t really like to think of it as a befriending scheme anymore... I just want it to be normal’ (SU1).

4.4.3 Natural progression

One service user expressed an interest in leaving YDM as a servicer user and going on to train as a befriender, one expressed an interest in being a befriender but at this stage felt more secure remaining as a service user whilst exploring alternate volunteering opportunities. The other two service users were happy with their current arrangement.

‘...if we left Mind then technically I could volunteer for Mind...I think I would rather be a service user than a volunteer... I have found other voluntary routes’ (SU1).

‘...we have outgrown this... I think it takes a little bit away from your friendship I think because you have made this positive friendship and then Mind is mentioned...we only remember that [my befriender] is part of Mind when someone rings up about it or we see someone’ (SU3).

4.4.4 Recommendations

The service users were asked to summarise their experience of the service and to identify what, if anything, they would change about the service:
...I think often the main issues of friendship is the first few steps and I think that is the hardest thing and I think the befriending service guided me through that...got me through the first sort of phase of making a friendship because that is where I struggle...it is difficult to know what the signs [of friendship] are or to know how to develop a friendship...but now I have done it, it has made me more willing to approach other people (SU1).

...glad I found out [about befriending service] from the counsellor... I know where my mind is and I can give [my befriender] a ring and pop down for a coffee, have a chat... I find it very helpful... (SU2).

... I could not have asked for it to be any better than it is and I think a lot of that is down to the positive experience I have had with [my befriender]...you get out of it what you put into it as well (SU3).

Well a lot of the time I felt like I was on my own and things were difficult to manage on my own all of the time and it is nice to have somebody who has the same interests as you and somebody you can talk to about things and not feel so isolated you know – because that is basically what it is (SU4).

**4.4.5 Outcomes**

The service users were asked what they felt they had taken from the befriending service and the findings highlight that some of the service users have been able to expand their social network and have made some significant steps as a result of the service

[my befriender] has made me feel a lot more confident in myself...originally thought I could not form friendships with anybody...[now] confident that actually I can maintain a relationship with somebody without getting those feelings of insecurity...has made me sort of more confident and get involved with different things and like meet other people...get back into work (SU1).
...got myself in a flat...now with [my befriender] I have church...support woman...go to work, going to Church and made me a few good friends there as well (SU2).

...I have done so much to try and move my life forward...it is the most stable I have been (SU3).

...I have found it really helpful and a couple of events I went on were quite good...I think there are still the groups [at Mind] I would be interested in and to be honest I think attendance is good considering the depression I go through and stuff...(SU4).

5 Discussion

It is clear that with the limited scope of this study it will not seek to provide a recommendation about the best way to implement befriending at a macroscopic level. Rather, this study aims to place the specific befriending service at YDM within the broader context of mental ill-health, its effects and the befriending approaches that seek to reduce these effects as experienced by the service users using the themes identified in the literature review and echoed in the findings.

5.1 Social isolation

The service user’s feedback comprehensively supports the information explored in the literature review that identified social isolation as a defining characteristic of people experiencing mental ill-health. The question remains, however, whether this social isolation is a symptom of mental ill-health or a causative factor.

All of the service users interviewed reported spending the majority of their time on their own. Although they had a number of mental health professionals that provided support, only one mentioned a family member at any point during the interviews which was significant, yet consistent with the report by Perese and Wolf (2005) that shows that service users typically have limited support from family or friends.
The industry perception that the majority of relationships experienced by those with mental ill-health can be classified as patient/carer is potentially significant and this will be explored in more detail when looking at the findings with regard to supportive relationships.

What is evident from the findings, however, is that although befriending does reduce the sense of isolation for service users there is room for society to play a much stronger role in reducing isolation and loneliness for those with mental ill-health.

5.2 The supportive relationship

The supportive relationship as a positive influence for those experiencing mental ill-health, is another area where the feedback provided by the YDM service users confirms the findings of related studies. This is consistent with a survey carried out by the Mental Health Foundation (2007) and reflects the themes presented at a lecture, attended by the researcher entitled ‘The Power of Befriending’ by Professor Gilligan which was delivered at the Befriending Network Conference in 2010. This presentation recounted many examples of the power of the relationship and suggested that volunteer befrienders can bring ‘new experiences, new connections and new beginnings’ (Gilligan, 2011, p. 5).

In particular, the service users placed an emphasis on the non-judgemental characteristic of their befrienders. The importance of simply having a friend to provide emotional support or just ‘being there’ for the service users emerged as one of the most important themes within the findings. All of the service users used words like ‘normal friendship’, ‘good’, ‘real’ or ‘regular friend’ to describe the relationship with their befriender throughout the interview. What came to the fore is that the volunteer befrienders are not seen by the service users as being clinically involved in their care and are, therefore, someone with whom they can form a genuine friendship (Perese and Wolf, 2005, Parsons et al 2004, Strawson, 2011).

Given the importance that the service users place on the friendship it is this facet that will be used as the point of reference to assess the YDM befriending service against the befriending models identified in the literature.
5.2.1 Befriending models

Taking the person-centred approach favoured by YDM it seems that this approach is more in keeping with the service users view of a friendship than perhaps a more goal oriented approach which the service users might view as a patient/carer relationship rather than a friendship.

That is not to say that the befriending relationship at YDM is completely without structure or objectives – the aims of the service after all are to reduce isolation and model good social relationships. It appears though that by identifying and making use of the aspirations of the service users themselves and by not defining fixed timings for the achievement of these aspirations it reduces the potential for anxiety and pressure which could detract from the friendly nature of the relationship.

YDM believe that one element of the befriender’s role is to model good social relationships. This is consistent with Bowlby’s theory of how when our internal working model is distorted it makes the replication of forming and maintaining relationships more difficult (Holmes, 1993). One service user explicitly said that it was ‘difficult to know what the signs [of friendship] are or to know how to develop a friendship...but now I have done it, it has made me more willing to approach other people’ (SU1). Through the acceptance and understanding of her befriender, as well as the trust within the relationship, the service user has been able to model and replicate this healthy friendship. ‘...Having once achieved this level of intimacy, they can harbour the hope and even the expectation of similar relationships”. (Yalom, 2005, p. 183) and yet no time-limit or expectation has been placed on the service user to achieve this outcome.

Although it is accepted that there is a place for goal oriented befriending it is felt that this approach requires a greater degree of training of the part of the befriender. The additional training would be necessary to ensure that the relationship remained beneficial and took into account the increased responsibility on the part of the befriender. It would seem therefore that there is a logical link between the use of a goal oriented approach and the existence of paid befrienders.
Returning to the service users view of the befriending relationship as a friendship it follows that the use of paid befrienders would detract from the equality of the relationship and may even be perceived by the service users as another instance of carer/patient relationship.

The final theme raised by the literature review regarded the question of open-ended versus time-limited befriending relationships. It has already been highlighted that time-limited relationships tend to be a characteristic of a more goal-oriented approach with the open-ended relationship a characteristic of a more person-centred approach.

Whether the befriending relationship should be time-limited is one often debated within befriending circles. Representatives from fifty five befriending projects met at ‘A Common Ground’ meeting in 2007 to discuss the merits of time-limited versus open-ended relationships at which time it was found that only nine of the projects put a time-limit on the duration of the befriending relationship. These projects cited their reason for employing a time-limited approach was to ensure that there was more focus on achieving progress in the time the service user and befriender spent together, although they stressed that only realistic goals were set.

The majority of project representatives however felt that the aim of befriending was to offer support to the most isolated individuals in society and that aim of befriending was to provide ongoing companionship rather than to identify goals. Furthermore it was felt that the quality of the match was more important than whether the relationship was time-limited or opened-ended. What was stressed was the need for matches to be monitored and reviewed regularly to ensure they are still meeting the needs of the individuals (Common Ground Meeting, 2007).

It was questioned whether the open-ended relationship would encourage a dependency to be formed on the befriender – the group felt that as people we are all dependent on others and this should be no different for service users. Provided it was not putting undue pressure on a befriender then it was disputed whether forming a dependency was an issue saying;
people don’t stick with our service because they’re dependant on it they stick with it because it’s all they have, if we withdraw we don’t make them more independent we make them completely alone (Common Ground Meeting, 2007, p. 2).

Interestingly, the findings conveyed in this study do not entirely match the ‘Common Ground Meeting’ perception of dependency yet neither do they support a time-limited approach. What became apparent in the interviews was that even though YDM employ an open-ended approach to the befriending relationship some of the service users felt that their time as a service user was coming to a natural conclusion.

Two of the service users wanted to acknowledge that they had a friendship in its own right and, although grateful to the befriending service for the introduction and the service, that they had now moved on to a point where the service wrap detracted from their view of the relationship as a real friendship. Whether this view of the volunteer befriender as a real friend should be considered a dependency or whether the service users' view of the relationship is skewed or has become misguided is not clear without being able to corroborate this view with the befriender volunteers in question. According to Jamieson (2008) in a befriending relationship there is the potential for;

...those who are befriended to see befriending as the same as friendship and then be disappointed. People who lack friends are often desperate to find them and may be more likely to want befriending to be a friendship (Jamison, 2008, p. 8).

The remaining elements of the findings that have not been covered in the discussion above are those presented under the headings of ‘introduction to the service’ and ‘outcomes’. These elements are the ones, that in the opinion of the researcher, provide the most compelling reading as they articulate the journey of the befriending relationship in the words of the service user and it is these which hold the key to answering the study question posed.
For the purpose of comparison it is hoped that the reader will forgive the duplication of findings but when presented side by side the strength of the statements stand alone and additional commentary by the researcher is superfluous.

In each instance the service users’ reason for joining the befriending service is provided first with their thoughts on what they have taken from the service below.

**SU1**

*I have quite a lot of difficulty mixing with people, fitting in and friends and that was one of my main issues...just need someone I can talk normally with...*

...*my befriender* has made me feel a lot more confident in myself...originally thought I could not form friendships with anybody...*now* confident that actually I can maintain a relationship with somebody without getting those feelings of insecurity...has made me sort of more confident and get involved with different things and like meet other people...get back into work.

**SU2**

*With me illness I seem to struggle on Saturdays and Sundays....would not know what to do on a Saturday a few years back went for a walk to the walls to throw myself off.*

...*got myself in a flat...now with my befriender I have church...support woman... go to work, going to Church and made me a few good friends there as well.*

**SU3**

*It was somebody to do things with that I could not do on my own...it was someone really who was able to keep an eye on my mental health...*

...*I have done so much to try and move my life forward...it is the most stable I have been.*
SU4

I had isolation problems and I would do things on my own and I would find that difficult so I were looking for some sort of friend who could do and would be prepared to do social activities with myself. And I realised my illness was affecting me quite badly.

...I have found it really helpful and a couple of events I went on were quite good...I think there are still the groups [at Mind] I would be interested in and to be honest I think attendance is good considering the depression I go through and stuff.

6 Conclusion

This study has a number of limitations which will be highlighted here in the interests of transparency and ensuring that the reader has been provided all pertinent information prior to the presentation of the conclusion.

Qualitative studies tend to employ a small sample of the user group and this study is no exception given the interviewed number of four out of a service user pool of fifty five. Limitations in the time and resources of a single researcher have dictated the use of a small representative number. Additionally, although the aim of this study was to gauge the experiences of the service users there are elements where the opinions of the volunteer befrienders would have contributed to a more holistic view.

This study has been limited to those service users currently in an active befriending relationship which explicitly excludes those who may have joined the service and left or having made initial contact never completed the matching process. The reasons for the service users having left or not completed the matching process is captured by the befriending co-ordinators in an exit interview and further evaluation could be made on this data captured.
The themes identified in this paper are the result of interpretation by a single researcher. If future studies in this area are to be commissioned it may be pertinent for researchers to be teamed in order that themes and interpretations can be peer-reviewed and validated.

In conclusion there are two areas of recommendation that have been identified from the service user’s feedback. The first of these relates to the waiting time between being referred to the service, being assessed and being matched with a volunteer befriender. Whilst it is fair to say that the service users interviewed experienced the matching process during YDM’s developing stage which may explain the significant waiting period the fact remains that there are still forty potential service users awaiting matches at the time of writing.

The solution proposed by this study is that the current YDM and York St John University relationship be strengthened and formalised in order to create a symbiotic union. Currently, counselling students at York St John are encouraged to seek different placements during each year of their degree course. If this approach was modified to create a number of befriending placement positions that lasted for the full three years of the degree course this would provide YDM with additional dedicated, skilled befriender volunteers for matching which potentially could reduce waiting times.

This in turn may support the second recommendation identified from the service user feedback which is a request for support by the befriending co-ordinators without the presence of befrienders during the early stage of the befriending relationship which is characterised by uncertainty.

The proposal itself presents an immediate problem: the availability of additional student befriender volunteers and the requirement to provide support to the service users at the early stages of the befriending lifecycle would necessitate additional befriending co-ordinators being available which in turn, in YDM’s current model where the befriending co-ordinator is a paid role, would, require additional funding.
As one of the difficulties encountered in obtaining funding is being able to measure and demonstrate the success of the service this is where the proposed relationship with York St John university provides the solution to its own problem. With a number of York St John students undertaking volunteer befriender placements at YDM they would be perfectly placed to carry out qualitative studies with the service users and volunteer befrienders thereby providing the evidence required to support YDM’s applications for funding. For the students this would have the added benefit of improving the skills required both to be a volunteer befriender and to undertake research. It is accepted that this may be over-simplifying the situation but it is the researcher’s firm belief that the current situation presents opportunities that could be of benefit to both organisations and should be explored.

Finally, when considering the evidence provided by the service users it is unmistakable that the befriending service at York and District Mind is meeting the needs and expectations of the service users. Perhaps when considering the future of the befriending service at YDM in the current economic climate it is inevitable that the considerations will be financial. If this study can make one final recommendation it is that if we are to think of the YDM befriending service in fiscal terms we should focus not on the cost of the service but on the value. After all, ‘It is not only possible for one human being to make a real and lasting difference to another, it is often the only thing that ever does (Community Links, 2008).
7 Bibliography


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