

Dealing with the Barriers to Happiness: Lessons from the Affinity Programme.

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Charlene Tait has worked in the field of autism for over thirty years. In that time she has been engaged in direct practice and service development. She was Lecturer and Course Director in Postgraduate Autism studies at the University of Strathclyde and has been involved in a number of national strategic initiatives. Charlene's time in autism began in 1990 with Scottish Autism (then Scottish Society for Autistic Children), she returned to the organisation in 2011 to take up the post of Director of Development and is now Deputy CEO. Her main areas of interest are in family support and enabling quality of life and quality lifestyles for people across the autism spectrum.

BACKGROUND

Stress and anxiety are commonplace in the lives of autistic people and impact on wellbeing and on leading a happy, fulfilling life. Self-Management is essential to living an autonomous life, yet there are few evaluated models of support that enable autistic people to identify what is concerning for them and, through accessing the right support at the right time, to address them.

The pandemic has, for many people, exacerbated levels of stress and anxiety. Scottish Autism received a range of funding sources from The Scottish Government, Barclays Bank and Scottish Power to provide support.

The nature of the funding required that a rapid response was made. As a result, the Affinity service was operational within four weeks of the model being designed.

THE PROGRAMME

The Affinity Programme connects autistic people to professional, time-limited support. It is immediately accessible, goal-directed, it utilises coaching, mentoring, and counselling practices and is, at all times, controlled by the client.

Affinity is a partnership, bringing together Scottish Autism, a national charity that provides a range of services and supports and AT- Autism a multi-disciplinary consortium of UK wide and international professionals including several who are themselves, autistic.

CORE FEATURES

- Recruitment of a flexible, experienced support team : 22 Team members were identified who brought a range of skills and expertise.
- Simple self-referral via the charity's advice line.
- Two stage triage to enable matching.
- Rapid allocation– matching the client to the most suitable team member in terms of discipline and experience. This process takes a maximum of one week, enabling clients to be routed to support with the absolute minimum wait time. Client then chooses whether to proceed.
- Access to up to 10 x 1 hour sessions.
- Professional Supervision for support team
- A Governance group – meeting regularly throughout the programme.
- A full evaluation was undertaken involving confidential client feedback.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE CHALLENGES?

- Establishing a new service in a pandemic with all offerings being online.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE BENEFITS?

- Client identifying and working toward achievement of own goals and being in control of the process.
- Flexibility, rapid response and high client satisfaction at low cost.
- Over 90% clients completed evaluation. 87% completed the programme in full. 95% reported their expectations were fully met or exceeded with fewer than 5% reporting their needs were not met.
- The wide range of needs met include dealing with identity issues, relationships, mental health, pre diagnostic issues and employment -related problems.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

The programme provides a model of highly effective, time limited support. It is relatively low cost with a very small number of clients, 2% requiring any follow up. This programme has potential as a model of pre and post-diagnostic and life span support.

PROCESS

