

## A support tool for friends of those who self-harm

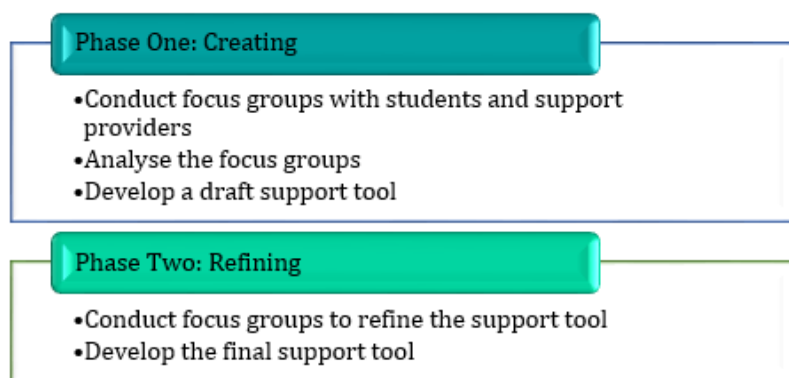
Hannah Heath (Department of Psychology); [h.e.s.heath@bath.ac.uk](mailto:h.e.s.heath@bath.ac.uk)

Hannah's postgraduate research has focused on the experiences of the friends of those who self-harm, and those who support them. In particular she is interested in exploring how young people make sense of supporting a friend who self-harms, and what impact this has on the friendship. Her research has demonstrated that friends often do not know how to support their friend, and often take on excessive levels of responsibility for their friend's welfare.

This project aimed to build on Hannah's research and to co-produce a practical support tool (a leaflet) for the friends of those that self-harm. In this way, the project translated Hannah's academic work into a practical tool with real-world impact.

### PROJECT SUMMARY

The project had two main phases as outlined in the diagram below.



In the project, I designed and delivered eight focus groups (five in phase one and three in phase two) targeted at both University students, and staff of two local support services. In total 24 people participated. Each focus group lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and was held either on-campus or at the support services themselves. I contacted local support services via email, explaining what I was interested in looking at and how

their specialist knowledge and insight would be vital in the development of the support tool.

In the first round of focus groups, participants were presented with mind maps, created in MindGenius. The main findings of my previous studies were outlined in each of the mind maps. Participants were invited to write on these maps, and to use them as a basis for discussion within the focus group. Participants were also asked about what preferences they had for how a support tool should look, such as size and layout.

After the first round of focus groups I developed a draft of the support tool content, consulted with experts in the area of self-harm, and then refined the draft further before presenting it at a further three focus groups. In these focus groups participants were asked to give feedback about the content, the layout, and the design used.

Feedback mainly focused on softening up the language, making sure that all the content was appropriate to a written support tool, and making it easier to navigate by making the titles more obvious. Following this feedback, the final support tool was developed.

### WHO WAS INVOLVED?

The staff of two local support service organisations.

## WHAT DID YOU GET FROM THE EXPERIENCE?

There were a number of ways that I benefited through this project, some more expected than others. I hoped that through conducting focus groups with the support services, I would develop a wider network of practitioner contacts across the South West area and this has happened. These contacts are already helping me to think about how the support tool could be altered for different audiences.

In terms of some unexpected outcomes from the project—through production of the support tool, I developed design skills and learnt how to use new software. And through a contact at one of the support services, I was invited to talk about the project on a local radio station in Bristol — BCfm—as part of their [Wellbeing Show](#). This provided a fantastic opportunity to promote my research but also, to think about the key messages that I wanted to convey.

*This project and the engagement that it entailed reminded me that my research has practical implications and offers real impact for people in the community. It was motivating to see people engage with my research through the project.*

## WHAT DID YOUR PARTNERS GAIN FROM THE EXPERIENCE?

The support services staff really enjoyed the opportunity to shape the leaflet. One said:

*Taking part in this project was a really valuable exercise for our organisation - it gave us a chance to share our expertise and spend time thinking about new areas and other aspects of our work. The process was very relaxed and informal and it was helpful that the researcher came to us and understood our work.*

I budgeted for a range of food and drinks to be offered during the focus groups. This proved a useful way to create an informal atmosphere, a friendly approach that meant people felt comfortable and willing to share their ideas.

## WHAT WOULD YOU DO DIFFERENTLY?

I under-estimated the amount of time it would take me to design and deliver this project; I'd give myself longer to deal with recruitment and retention issues for the focus groups.

As part of the first phase of focus groups, I gave people handouts to write their ideas on but few did. So, I adapted and used the handouts as a spring-board for discussion, a way to direct the flow of conversation. Although the handouts did not fulfil their intended purpose, I think it was still helpful for the participants to have some visual reference point for the discussion.



In the second phase of focus groups, when participants were presented with the draft support tool, they were more willing to annotate it. I think the visual references in the support tool helped people to open up more.

## TOP TIPS

- Be prepared for no-shows; assume that for every focus group you organise at least two people will not show up. Think through how you can adapt activities in the light of no-shows;
- Run with opportunities that are presented to you as your project progresses. I connected with new people along the way, always following up contacts that I was given. Prior to the project, I think I would have shied away from challenges. The project made me challenge myself and to say 'yes' to new experiences.