



# **TRANSITIONING TO DISTANCE BEFRIENDING**

**Guidance for Befrienders during COVID-19**

Befriending services can come in a range of delivery methods. Commonly, there are:

- Face-to-face befriending
- Telephone befriending
- Video-call befriending
- Letter/e-mail befriending
- Group befriending

There can be a mixture of delivery methods within one project, but it is quite common that a befriending project has just one delivery method. Occasionally, there is a requirement to transform a project to a different delivery method.

There are many reasons why a service may do this. Currently, services are cancelling their face-to-face delivery after Government recommendations on how to proceed safely during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

This guide has been created to support befrienders who have been trained to deliver face-to-face or group befriending but have now been asked to do telephone befriending.

This guide includes:

- The key to telephone/distance befriending
- Conversations around COVID-19
- Maintaining standards

## Distance Befriending

*Distance Befriending* can describe any befriending relationship which can be conducted from a distance using some form of communication technology. A befriending match which is established through distance befriending means the two people involved, the service user and befriender, may never meet.

At this time, as a lot of projects try to handle the social distancing recommendations made by the government, projects are transitioning into distance befriending. In this situation, service users and befrienders have met and will have to adapt to this new form of delivery. As with every form of delivery, there are pros and cons.

| Advantages of distance befriending   | Disadvantages of distance befriending  |
|--|--|
| Less time consuming for the befriender   | Connection/technology problems   |
| Befrienders can befriend more than one service user if they are happy to and at present some services are asking volunteers if they are willing to do this | No body language, facial expressions so communication is dependent on word choice and tone |
| Befriending relationships can happen at a time that suits both parties without the conflict of travel times, care duties etc.                              | Can feel less of a connection if you are supporting someone you have never met in person   |
| Those geographically or socially isolated due to COVID-19 can still get support safely   | Cost of phone calls/internet   |
| Projects can increase capacity and support those on their waiting lists in an effective way during this time   | Concern if the phone call is not answered  |
| Makes befriending more inclusive for people who are disabled/ill   | Background noise / distractions  |
| Can use a likes, dislikes, hobbies hints sheet to guide conversation   | If someone is hard of hearing it can strain the conversation                               |

## **Communication standards**

Stereotypically, befriending supports people who are socially isolated or lonely. The befriending service should provide a form of comfort, connection and community through good communication. Transitioning to distance befriending from face-to-face delivery can be a hurdle at first. We want to ensure we maintain the high level of standard in the new delivery.

*Good communication skills* are the ability to listen and speak to people appropriately. Listening and speaking respectfully are at the heart of befriending.

Befriending services often work with people who have little opportunity to experience someone capable of really listening to them. Taking care to communicate accurately and with respect can make all the difference to a service user and have a very positive effect on them.

Good communication skills can be applied to 1:1, phone calls, letters, video calls and emails. Though it may seem strange at first, not being able to see your befriending match or to be supporting someone you have never met before, you can still deliver a high-quality befriending service through distance methods.

## **Good Practice Guidelines – Skills for Telephone Befriending**

Transitioning to a telephone service or delivering telephone befriending can be difficult at first. Here are some good practice guidelines to help you:

- Try to relax yourself and allow for a calm setting.
- Try to put the service user at ease and allow them time to get comfortable at the start of the call. Don't be afraid of silences
- Make sure that the call time is appropriate. If they seem to display anger/frustration or upset, ask are they okay to talk now or would they like a call back and agree a time for this

- Resist distraction – whether external or internal distraction, focus on the conversation with your match
- Respect and care about the service user, listening to them and their stories, feelings is a privilege
- Explore the current issues: use open questions, reflecting, closed questions to clarify a point
- Allow the service user to set the pace and to tell their story in their way
- Listen carefully, consider what is being said between the lines
- It is human nature to try to make things better but be appropriate to the service users needs, not your own
- Provide feedback, do not interrupt but give them clarification that you are listening
- At intervals, sum up what the service user to ensure you have understood them correctly
- Ask questions, take an interest in what they are saying
- At the end of each call, check you have the right date and time for the next call
- Once the call is finished, make note of a few key points of discussion, this can assist you with your next phone call

**During the Covid-19 pandemic, please speak to the service user to check on their welfare:**

- Do they have a supply of food and general house supplies such as soap? Are they eating well? Do they have enough supply of their regular medication? How are they getting these?
- Do they have neighbours checking on them?
- How are they feeling regarding isolation and loneliness during this pandemic?
- Are they happy with you continuing to keep in touch this way at the moment?
- Promote having a structure, trying to keep meal times and a sleep pattern
- Promote turning off the news sometimes, it may lower stress levels to have a break from it *i.e. read a book, listen to radio, phone friends/family or take a break in their garden if they have one*

## Information Guidance

Our service users may not have access to the internet or be able to leave the home. You, the befriender, may be the only connection to the community that they have. It may be your role to update the service user on the pandemic please do this responsibly. Let them know the current NHS Guidance and remind them of some of the simple steps they can take:

- Wash hands with soap and hot water often, take at least 20seconds to do so
- Use hand sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or sleeve when we cough or sneeze
- Put used tissues in the bin straight away and wash our hands afterwards
- Avoid close contact with people who are unwell

You should only provide information taken from reliable sources such as:

**NHS SCOTLAND:** <https://www.nhsinform.scot/coronavirus>

**PUBLIC HEALTH ENGLAND:** <https://bit.ly/3965NeW>

Make sure you understand fully any information that you give. Information might need to be broken down into bite-sized chunks. Check information has been understood with your service user before moving on. It is important to use appropriate language and pace. If you are asked a question by the service user and you do not know the answer, please admit this. You can offer to look into it and get back to them with the correct information.

If you are not comfortable with this, please speak to your coordinator.

Some pointers for structuring your conversation while telephone befriending. It is important that we are supportive, empathetic and considerate on the phone but we do not want to give false hope at this time:

### Structuring the conversation: What not to do

Refrain from reassuring that everything will be alright and you can make things better

Divert the conversation away from what the person is saying

Assume you know everything about the situation

Don't tell the person what to do

Offer sympathy (could make someone feel more helpless and worthless)

### Structuring the conversation: What to do

#### **Open/helpful statements,**

"Perhaps you can tell me more about that"

"It might be helpful if you could tell me what happened"

#### **Open/helpful questions,**

"Can you tell me what happens when you are unable to leave the house?"

"What sort of things do you do when you are worried?"

#### **DO NOT USE Closed/Unhelpful Questions/statements,**

"What are you going to do about it?"

"You'll be fine, don't worry"

### **Getting support in your befriending role**

Contact your organisation for up to date guidance. Ensure you are up to date with protocol during this COVID-19 time. Contacting the coordinator directly may allow you to access information, guidance and support.

Please make sure to take advantage of the support available from the project you are volunteering with. Support and supervisions are an important part of supporting you however during COVID-19, your coordinator will not be able to offer you support and supervision in a face-to-face setting. In replacement, you may be offered a support session via telephone, email or skype.

These sessions are your opportunity to share any concerns, questions or ideas you may have. It is also your opportunity to discuss how you are feeling, during this pandemic, the recommendation to maintain social isolation is to try to ensure safety for your health and limit spread of the virus. Self-isolating can have a negative effect on your mental health and those you are supporting. It is important to acknowledge how you feel when speaking to the coordinator.

We have previously created guidance on looking after your mental wellbeing while befriending. You can find this resource here:

<https://www.befriending.co.uk/resources/24737-protecting-your-well-being-guidance-for-befrienders>

### **What if I get sick?**

If you yourself fall ill, please inform your coordinator at the first opportunity. Though we understand you may feel tempted to power through and make phone calls from home while ill, this is not necessary. You must look after yourself. Many services have procedures in place to accommodate this circumstance:

- The organisation may ask another befriender to take over your phone calls
- The coordinator may take over the phone calls while you are ill
- The service user will be kept up to date and asked their opinion on how best to proceed by the coordinator

### **What if I want to do more?**

Requests for befrienders will escalate as people are forced to socially isolate and group activities stop during the pandemic. If you think you could provide more support to the organisation you are befriending with, you could request an additional match. Many befrienders may be in a position where they can take on an additional match(es).

As distance befriending does not have travel time included, befrienders may have more time to accommodate befriending. This may be temporary, but is an opportunity to provide a valuable befriending service for those on the waiting list or others the project is trying to support.

Speak to your coordinator about your availability and they will be able to guide you on what is available in your particular organisation and how you can help them at this time.

## **Protecting your mental health during social distancing and self-isolation**

COVID-19 Pandemic can mean our focus is on helping as many people as we can as the communities' isolation and loneliness levels escalate rapidly due to social distancing and self-isolation.

Like many of us, you may be stuck at home, practicing social distancing and self-isolation as we work. It is important that we acknowledge how we are feeling as well. Here are some pointers for protecting your wellbeing during this time:

1. Keep in touch with friends and family - phone, watsapp, skype, emails etc.
2. Limit time looking at the news/social media and ensure it is reliable information and does not cause you too much stress
3. Establish a routine – include some of the suggestions below:
  - Exercise – Fitness DVD, Wii fit, use equipment (exercise bike), online You Tube exercise classes, dancing, walking up and down stairs
  - Nature – If you have a garden or outside area spend time looking after it and relaxing in it. House plants, flowers, etc. If you can safely have a short walk outside – as long as you are avoiding social contact
  - Entertainment & Relaxation – Books, jigsaws, TV, music (listening, playing and instrument or singing), write a poem or short story, crosswords, colouring, painting, scrapbooking, make cards, baking
  - Do a focussed activity – Tidy a wardrobe, paint the hallway, Sort through old photos, batch cook some of your favourite meals for the freezer
4. When things start to feel overwhelming, talk to someone!

Some useful links:

- <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>
- <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak>
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-51873799>

## **Boundaries during COVID-19**

During this time, many organisations are amending their service boundaries to accommodate these complex circumstances. Please check with your coordinator the following factors:

1. Does the distance service apply to office hours or can you schedule contact for a time that suits you both best?
2. Are you allowed to give out your phone number? Or do you have to hide it to make the phone call?
3. Has the service user given their consent for you to have their number?
4. Is there guidance on how long the phone calls should last?
5. Is there guidance on how frequent the phone calls should be?
6. Are you both clear about expectations and what is going to be happening?
7. If you are worried about the service user or have concerns what is the contact number for the coordinator or project you should use?

## Your next steps

Please consider the following to discuss with your coordinator:

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| <b>What do you think will be the biggest hurdle in this transition?</b>  |
|  |
| <b>How do you think your service user feels about using the telephone?</b>                                       |
|  |
| <b>Do they have issues with their hearing that may require a switch to letters or emails?</b>                    |
|  |
| <b>Are you comfortable with this change of delivery?</b>   |
|  |
| <b>Do you feel you could take on an additional match to support the high demand during the pandemic?</b>         |
|  |
| <b>Are you fully aware of the boundaries, policies and procedures set out by your organisation at this time?</b> |
|  |

## Any questions

If you are unsure about anything, please contact your coordinator or organisation. If you have any questions about this document, please email [Victoria@befriending.co.uk](mailto:Victoria@befriending.co.uk) and we will get back to you as soon as we can.