Personal Outcomes Stories during COVID: Phase 2 understanding from experience

Paula Ferguson, Counsellor in secondary schools
What has continued to help keep a focus on what matters for people during the pandemic? As someone who has worked in the voluntary sector for a number of years, my experience is that it remains committed to providing services based on need and on responding to the needs of its client groups. I have remained in small voluntary sector organisations for so long, despite frequent job insecurity, as I feel it offers great opportunities to engage really closely with your service users, and to enable their needs to shape the services provided. For example, the organisation I now work for has succeeded in getting funding to ensure that young people in the area can still access therapeutic input both virtually and face-to-face. We have workers who are doing socially distanced meet-ups with young people outdoors and these are really popular in engaging service users in the work they're doing on their mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. I'd say a positive thing that has emerged from the pandemic is that finally, young people's early intervention mental health services are being taken very seriously. Two years ago the Scottish Government committed to putting counsellors in all schools and now it is happening in several schools in the Lothians. I feel the pandemic has helped this commitment come to fruition. I also feel the media has been very useful in giving a voice to those experiencing some very desperate situations.
Are there changes that seem to be lasting longer term and are there things that have slid back to old ways of doing things? Overall I feel we're returning to a less hopeful situation (compared to the start of the pandemic) where job insecurity, inequality and division between people are all on the rise. I worry for the long-term implications of this. On the other hand, as I mentioned in the previous question, the continued focus upon young people's wellbeing seems to hopefully be a long-term commitment, which I find very encouraging. Another thing I find a bit more hopeful is that much of the media is shining a light on how our govts are getting so much wrong. I also notice the media really highlighting the good work of eg Marcus Rashford and Raheem Sterling who are both striving to do great things for their communities. These are the people I hope will encourage and inspire hope within others.
What difference has this made to people?

I can't help but think that many people working in the services for the elderly, and also those providing acute care in the NHS, must be disillusioned coming into the colder months. This is a real worry in terms of how services are kept running as winter illnesses accelerate and Covid cases increase.

I also worry for people who need other NHS services, although I do know of two people who have received excellent cancer care (including operations and chemo) throughout the pandemic. It's reassuring to know that life is going on beyond Covid.

From a personal perspective, I'm really happy to be working in a smaller organisation that is well-run and where staff are highly motivated due to the great support we receive from management. The in turn has led to everyone seeking creative solutions to ensuring young people get the services they need just now.

How did this make you feel?
I have very mixed feelings – day to day, I experience so many different feelings in relation to what is happening in the world right now. I always come back to how grateful I feel personally for the situation I'm currently in, whilst also worrying about what the world will look like longer-term. I try to focus on the here and now and get through that way. I have become quite energised in my anger.

Reflecting on your experiences what have you learned?
I have definitely learnt how lucky I am to be able to work from home – this has helped me to feel safe. I have been surprised at how I adapted to using technology as a means of delivering counselling. Many counsellors don't like this way of working but I've adapted a 'needs must' mindset and ran with it.

I have learnt that the more I watch the news, the less empowered and the more scared I feel for the present and the future. My current strategy is to limit my news intake and focus on the things I CAN do to keep myself and others safe.

What difference has it made to you to tell your story as part of this project?
A key part of my personal and professional way of being is reflectiveness – this has allowed me to stop and evaluate my own learnings throughout the pandemic.

Anything else you want to tell us?
Thanks 😊