

'I was lost in my life and they helped me find my way again': Befriender and befriender experiences of the Spirasi Befriending Programme for survivors of torture in Ireland

Rachel Hoare¹

Abstract

Introduction: Befriending is one of the rehabilitative services embedded in the holistic approach adopted by Spirasi, the Irish National Centre for the Rehabilitation of Survivors of Torture. Their befriending programme offers survivors one-to-one companionship from trained volunteer befrienders. The literature suggests that befriending programmes can improve quality of life, provide emotional support and combat loneliness. However, there is little empirical research of the effectiveness of befriending programmes for torture survivors.

Objective: The main objective was to explore, in complementary ways, the impact of the Spirasi befriending programme on befrienders and befrienderes and to incorporate their voices into recommendations for optimising the service.

Methods: The methodology consisted of five focus groups (two with befrienderes, two with befrienders and one with both) and a portrait workshop facilitated by two community artists, where each befriending pair member created a portrait of their partner to express and visually explore the befriending relationship. Data comprised the focus group

transcripts and written feedback on the portrait-creation process.

Results: The themes identified in both data sets firmly ground the befriending programme in Spirasi's holistic approach to recovery. For the focus group participants, befriending promotes integration; models trusting, kind and reciprocal relationships; combats loneliness and protects against suicide. They also highlighted the importance of regular befriender training, increasing the programme's reach and developing a befriender community of practice. The portrait workshop was found to strengthen relationships and provide a context of normality, acceptance and shared humanity through compassionate and creative exchanges.

Conclusions: This paper highlights the benefits of the befriending programme within Spirasi's holistic approach and the importance of collaborative expressive arts activities in building befriending relationships. It provides recommendations for good befriending practice which are relevant to all organisations working with survivors of torture as well as those working with people seeking international protection more broadly.

Keywords: Torture survivor, befriending, focus group, expressive arts, holistic approach

1) School of Languages, Literatures and Cultural Studies, Trinity College, Dublin.

Correspondence to: rmhoare@tcd.ie

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International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims.

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, by mid 2022, 103 million people worldwide had been forced to flee their homes (UNHCR, 2022). This figure includes 53.2 million internally displaced people who did not cross an international border during flight; 4.9 million asylum seekers who sought sanctuary in another country and 32.5 million refugees who were granted sanctuary in another country. Of those who have been forcibly displaced, up to 35% report being survivors of torture (Abu Suhaiban, Grasser, & Javanbakht, 2019), widely considered to be a conservative estimate (Perez-Sales, 2018). As recent figures from the Irish International Protection Office (IPO) report 13651 applicants for international protection in Ireland in 2022 (IPO, 2023), it is likely that during this period, approximately 4700 survivors of torture sought refuge in Ireland.

The mission of Spirasi, the National Centre for the Rehabilitation of Survivors of Torture in Ireland, established in 1999, is to rehabilitate asylum seekers and refugees who have experienced torture, 'through the delivery of evidence-based, multi-disciplinary models of person-centred care' (Spirasi, 2022). As a member of the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), Spirasi abides by the UNCAT definition of torture (UNCAT, 1984) and its work is informed by global best practice and established standards for holistic rehabilitation delivery (IRCT, 2020). Spirasi's befriending programme is embedded in their holistic approach and has been offering service users one-to-one companionship from trained volunteer befrienders since 2017 (Spirasi, 2022).

Befriending is a form of volunteering which involves supportive one-to-one companionship over a defined time period (Thompson, Valenti, Siette, & Priebe, 2016). Befriending programmes match people with

limited support networks with volunteers who offer support and friendship and facilitate integration (Siette, Cassidy, & Priebe, 2017). The existing literature suggests that befriending programmes can improve quality of life (Silverman et al., 2017), provide emotional support (Askins, 2014); and combat loneliness (Stephens, et al., 2015). However, there remains a lack of empirical research of befriender and befriendee experiences, particularly in relation to refugees and survivors of torture (Salway, et al., 2020).

This paper attempts to address this dearth of research by contributing to the literature on refugee befriending in two distinctive ways: firstly through focusing on befriending experiences for survivors of torture and their befrienders, and secondly through combining focus groups, an interview with key informants (hereafter 'interview') and a portrait workshop in order to explore and deepen the participant experiences of the programme and look at possibilities for improvement. The recommendations made from the findings form the basis of an evidence-informed policy revision of the befriending programme.

This paper firstly surveys the nature and impact of befriending programmes in different contexts and then focuses on refugees and survivors of torture. It then situates the Spirasi Befriending Programme in their holistic approach to the rehabilitation of torture survivors. The methodology section is followed by a discussion of the findings from the focus groups and portrait workshop and the article concludes with recommendations for best practice.

The impact of befriending programmes

Befriending has been found to be particularly effective for people experiencing mental health challenges, older people and those with disabilities where the provision of befriending support in different community and home settings can

help develop social networks and other forms of support (Thompson et al., 2016). Cassidy et al., (2019:8), highlight the positive impact of ‘doing things’ rather than ‘just being there’ for those experiencing mental health challenges, whilst Devine (2014) emphasises the benefits for older people who are vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness. Silverman et al., (2017), identify the benefits for members of befriending pairs who share a disability. Supporting befriendees with mental health challenges, experiences of loss, feelings of loneliness and the desire to be connected with those with shared experiences, aligns with the experiences of refugees and survivors of torture. There are therefore many ways in which learnings can be shared and activities replicated within and between these communities.

The theoretical underpinnings of befriending programmes range from intentional friendship models, where the befriending alliance can develop into a reciprocal and equal relationship, to mentoring initiatives where the relationship facilitates the achievement of personal goals (Thompson et al., 2016). In practice, many befriending programmes enjoy aspects of both models. Predominantly intentional befriending models such as that adopted by Spirasi, have been shown to foster befriender feelings of validation and acceptance within the context of the typical navigation and management of natural friendships. Although a focus on goals may be beneficial for some befriending pairs, the possibility of goal non-attainment may constitute a risk in this model by setting the befriender up for failure, although this can be mitigated through collaborative goal shaping and refining (Balaam, 2014). Irrespective of their different characteristics, training, supervision and on-going support are common features of most programmes (McGowan & Jowett, 2003).

Devine (2014) outlines different befriending approaches including face-to-face befriending,

telefriending, e-befriending and community-based befriending. Examples of diverse approaches internationally include a peer visiting programme for older adults with volunteers of a similar age in Ireland for the reduction of loneliness (Lawlor, 2014); culturally-sensitive befriending activities which respected Māori cultural practices in New Zealand community settings through telephone calls (care calling) or home visiting (Chal, 2004); and an inter-generational technology instruction programme in London (Mulvihill, 2011).

Although many refugee befriending programmes have been set up in host countries by charities aiming to facilitate refugee integration (e.g. Bridges for Communities, Host-Nation and Restore in the UK; Jesuit Mission in Indonesia; SCARF in Australia; Rescate in Spain), relatively little empirical research has explored befriender and befriender experiences of these programmes. Notable exceptions include Behnia’s (2007) review of the befriender recruitment obstacles faced by 25 refugee befriending programs; Askins’ (2014) evaluation of a refugee befriending scheme in north-east England and McCarthy and Haith-Cooper’s (2013) evaluation of the impact of befriending for pregnant refugee women. Furthermore, a comprehensive search of Psych-INFO, Psych-Articles, and the Social Science Database suggests that there is very little representation of torture survivor voices in the befriending literature, with the notable exception of Chambon et al.’s., (2001) review of befriending for survivors of torture in Canada.

Situating the Spirasi Befriending Programme in the holistic approach to the rehabilitation of torture survivors

The severe physical and psychological impact of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment can have devastating con-

sequences for survivors, their families and their broader communities (Williams & van der Merwe, 2013), creating barriers which prevent survivors from building and maintaining relationships and pursuing personal and professional goals. For those fleeing violence, the physical and psychological consequences are often compounded by further traumatic experiences during flight, and in reception and detention centres in the host country (Morina & Nickerson, 2018).

To be effective, the rehabilitation of torture survivors must therefore recognise and address the complexity and potential impact of interacting psychological, cultural, social, political, economic, biological, medical and spiritual dimensions as well as developing survivor's agency and empowerment (IRCT, 2020). Spirasi's holistic approach to rehabilitation which has been adapted from Herman's Phase Model Approach to Trauma (Herman, 1992), emphasises the need for safety and stabilisation before moving towards trauma processing and integration, principles reflected in their provision of medical, therapeutic, psychosocial, befriending and language support. The integration phase is very well served by the Spirasi befriending programme which aims to reduce isolation and loneliness whilst providing integration opportunities. Spirasi befrienders offer emotional, informational, instrumental and language supports to their befriendees, which may take the form of witnessing stories, providing information about educational opportunities, practical support such as taking children on trips and language practice.

Potential volunteers are provided with information about Spirasi and the befriending programme and invited to complete the application and police vetting forms. They then meet with the befriending coordinator (hereafter coordinator), who is responsible for recruiting, matching and supporting befrienders and be-

friendees as well as managing the befriending programme within the multidisciplinary Spirasi team. If the applicant is considered suitable for befriending, they will be invited to a half day online induction session with other new befrienders which covers the Irish International Protection Process, building relationships and respecting boundaries and developing cultural competency and humility. Ongoing support is provided by the coordinator after the matching process, with scheduled meetings every three months and periodic information sessions.

Referrals are made to the befriending programme by Spirasi clinicians either through initial assessment or their therapy work. Any client who wishes to engage in befriending meets the coordinator so that their needs and interests can be assessed. Befriender-befriender matching is based on an alignment of mutual interests and the skill set of the befriender to meet the befriender needs. As of February 2023, the programme has 109 befriendees aged between 29 and 46 (see Table 1 for their countries of origin) and 82 active befrienders with an average age of 63 years. The majority of befrienders are Irish and come from diverse backgrounds in 17 of the 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland.

Methodology

Approach

An inductive qualitative approach was considered appropriate given the relatively small number of befriending programme participants and the importance of an in-depth exploration of their experiences. Although the research is not truly participatory as the participants were not involved in its planning or design, every effort was made at all other stages to respond sensitively to their ongoing needs. For example, although individual interviews were part of the original research design, it

became clear after the first focus group that participants were likely to feel more comfortable in a group setting where they could safely share their insights with other participants, so individual interviews were not run and replaced with additional focus groups. In relation to the proposed fifth focus group, several participants were unable to attend at short notice and it was decided to change the format to an interview with key informants (hereafter interview) comprising one male befriending pair and the coordinator.

Ethical considerations

Given the vulnerabilities of the befriender participants, a clear process was followed to ensure that participation was voluntary. The Spirasi coordinator e-mailed a request for expressions of interest to all Spirasi befrienders and befriendees which included detailed information emphasising the voluntary nature of participation and the fact that participants could withdraw at any time. Informed written consent was sought from those who expressed an interest and oral consent was sought again on the day of the data collection. A *Protocol for dealing with Stressed Participants* was developed which outlined the procedure to be followed if a participant seemed disinterested, uncomfortable or upset at any stage, and included follow-up after the session.

As a practising psychotherapist working with vulnerable populations, the researcher is skilled in talking to individuals about sensitive and emotional topics and participant safety and welfare was prioritised at every stage of the research. To minimise the chance of causing psychological harm, questions were not asked about befriender experiences before arrival or their reasons for leaving. It was, however, recognised that participants may have chosen to impart this information and also that participants may have become upset for unpredict-

able reasons. The researcher was mindful of this throughout the data collection process and ensured that every effort was made to minimise stress. Ethical approval for the research was granted by Trinity College (FREC-FAHSS-2122-42).

Participants

The befriendees were aged between 29 and 46. As documenting country of origin and exact age in the individual focus group extracts would increase the possibility of befriendee identification, neither age nor country of origin were included. Table 1 shows that the origins of the participant befriendees are broadly representative of the befriending programme as a whole.

The gender ratios of befrienders and befriendees in the programme and in the research, which are provided in Table 2, show that 78% of active befrienders are female, thereby reflecting the predominance of women in the volunteering sector in Ireland (Donoghue, 2001). The ratio of male befrienders and befriendees was higher in the research than in the programme.

It is important to note that when the call was made for participants for portrait workshop participants, only females expressed an interest, a familiar pattern in other community and therapeutic arts production contexts (Askins, 2014).

Methods

Four focus groups and one interview were firstly conducted to explore befriender and befriendee experiences of the programme and to look at possibilities for improvement. A portrait workshop for seven befriending pairs was then facilitated by a community artist working in Ireland and a Syrian artist who was seeking asylum in Ireland. In a non-intentional version of befriending, the two

artists had met through an artist network and become friends. Each pair member created a portrait of their partner to express and visually explore the friendship formed through befriending. Feedback on participant experiences of the portrait-creation process focused on how it helped develop their befriending relationship. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the focus group, key informant, and portrait workshop data.

Data collection

Three of the focus groups, the interview and the portrait workshop were conducted in Trinity College, Dublin between February and May 2022. An additional focus group took place via Zoom to facilitate participants unable to travel

to Dublin. All participants engaged fully with the research and no-one withdrew during the study. The composition of each focus group and the interview were as follows:

Focus groups

It was decided that mixed focus group compositions would provide richer more meaningful data. One group therefore consisted of befriendees, one of befrienders and the other two, together with the interview, were a mixture of befriending pairs and the befriending coordinator. The rationale for this was that it would provide the befriendees and befrienders with the opportunity to interact solely with one another but also with the coordinator, sharing ideas, experiences

Table 1. Befriender countries of origin

| Befriender origin by region | Number of befrienders in programme | % of befrienders in programme | Number of befrienders participating in research | % of befrienders participating in research |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Africa | 76 | 70% | 11 | 73% |
| Middle East | 11 | 10% | 1 | 7% |
| South Asia | 18 | 17% | 2 | 13% |
| Europe | 4 | 4% | 1 | 7% |
| Total | 109 | | 15 | |

Table 2. Gender ratios of befrienders and befriendees

| Befrienders | Male | Female |
|----------------------|------|--------|
| Overall in Programme | 22% | 78% |
| Focus Groups | 40% | 60% |
| Portrait Workshop | 0% | 100% |
| Overall in research | 25% | 75% |
| Befriendees | Male | Female |
| Overall in Programme | 40% | 60% |
| Focus Groups | 33% | 67% |
| Portrait Workshop | 0% | 100% |
| Overall in research | 20% | 80% |

Table 3. Focus Group Composition

| Focus group | Composition |
|-------------|---|
| 1 | 2 male and 5 female befriendees |
| 2 | 3 male and 4 female befrienders |
| 3 | 1 female befriending pair, 1 male befriender, coordinator |
| 4 | 2 female befriending pairs, 1 male befriender, coordinator (online) |
| Interview | 1 male befriending pair, coordinator |

and opinions which would lead to knowledge creation. There was already a very close, respectful and caring relationship between the coordinator and the participants meaning that there was no signs of power dynamics in operation.

While the topics for the semi-structured focus group and interview guide (the same guide was used for both methods) were identified through discussions between the coordinator and the author and informed by the former’s interactions with befrienders and befriendees over a five year period, as well as the author’s therapy work with people seeking international protection, the discussion was directed by participant voices. The following exploratory topics were included in the focus group and interview guide:

- experiences of being befriended
- nature of the befriending role
- befriending as part of a holistic approach
- distinguishing between Spirasi support services
- explaining befriending
- experiences of befriender recruitment and training
- evolving befriender perceptions of those seeking asylum
- improving befriending supports

At the beginning of each focus group the researcher re-introduced the objectives of the

study and obtained verbal informed consent having already obtained written consent, as part of the process of obtaining ongoing consent. All focus groups and the interview were conducted in English as all participants had high fluency levels. They were recorded using a digital audio recording App and lasted for between 44 and 55 minutes.

One day portrait workshop

The portrait workshop took place in Trinity College, Dublin. The seven female befriending pairs who came forward to participate were invited to bring images, text and photographs for incorporation into a collage background. A wide range of art materials was also provided by the artists on the day. The pairs were encouraged to discuss together which colours, patterns and textures they thought might best convey their personalities and to include something in the collaging which would link them, such as a matching pattern, colour or texture. They were then provided with a template to draw their partner’s facial features and were guided through all stages of the process.

Debriefing arrangements and payment

The author thanked the participants, asked for any further questions and again provided her contact details during a ten minute debriefing period at the end of each focus group, interview and the portrait workshop. For further support, participants were encouraged

to contact their Spirasi therapist or psychosocial coordinator both of whom had been notified. The participants were informed that they would be given the opportunity to review the focus group transcripts. All befriendees were reimbursed travel costs and paid 25 euros for their participation.

Data analysis

The focus group and interview audio data was transcribed using the Jefferson Conversation Analysis transcription system (Hepburn & Bolden, 2012). The transcripts were then reviewed for precision and de-identified. Joint befriender/befriendee evaluations of the portrait workshop focused on the extent to which it had helped to develop their friendships. The author also recorded her reflections through written observations and photos. The data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2014), with no pre-determined coding frame. Participants were informed that all potentially identifying information would be removed and pseudonyms used, to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Results and analysis

Focus groups and interview

Transcripts were read repeatedly for familiarisation with the complexity and scope of the data and interesting features were assigned initial codes which were combined into potential themes according to similarity and prevalence and re-checked against the data. The thematic analysis identified 38 categories, comprising 86% of the data, which were grouped into the following key themes:

1. Befriending as part of the holistic approach to recovery
2. Need for regular trauma-informed training

3. Building trust and providing support
4. Combatting loneliness and protecting against suicide
5. Mutual kindness and reciprocity
6. Increasing the programme's scope and developing a community of practice

As the themes which came up in the face-to-face and online focus groups and the interview were closely aligned, they were all considered together.

Theme 1: Befriending as part of the holistic approach to recovery

This was a strong theme in the data as befriendees described their experiences of being able to engage in different services as they needed them:

When I first came to Spirasi I was feeling bad and I felt welcomed and listened to. I went to therapy not knowing what it was but they were so patient and said it would be good to have a befriender so I agreed and those two things together literally saved my life. (Afiya, F, befriendee, Africa)

Claude appreciated having access to all Spirasi services as well as being helped to identify which services he needed:

It was like one place with different ways of helping and that works best cos you need different things at different times. They helped me know that I needed befriending. (Claude, M, Africa)

For Tanya, the befriending programme was a vital part of her healing process :

When I went to Spirasi I wasn't sure exactly what I was looking for. I was lost in my life and they helped me to find my way again

between the doctor and my befriender. (Tanya, F, Africa).

The bendifrinders also recognised the value of this holistic approach and their important role within it:

This rehabilitation reminds me of a clock where every moving part is important and befriending is a vital part. (Joyce, F, befriender)

Theme 2: Need for regular trauma-informed training

Several bendifrinders suggested that it would be really useful to have refresher training just before their first befriender meeting, given that the matching process could take some time:

I'd have liked a refresher just before the first meeting because it took a while to be assigned a person and I'd forgotten a lot. (Jim, male befriender)

Anna was in agreement, highlighting the amount of information presented during the training:

Yeah there's a lot – it's intensive and you can only take in a certain amount. (Anna, female befriender)

Patrick suggested that regular sessions would be useful:

I'd like a drop-in session every three months to be able to raise questions or share ideas about things I find difficult. (Patrick, male befriender)

The question of how much information bendifrinders should be given about the be-

friender before they met for the first time was also raised:

It would have been useful to have a little bit more background information, so that you know how you approach the friendship. I had to feel my way around because I didn't know what topics to avoid. (Naomi, female befriender)

Anna suggested that at the very minimum, it would be useful to have some information about the family situation:

Yeah, more information, especially like are their families alive or dead? There is just this big gap when you're befriending someone and you have absolutely no knowledge about the person whose standing in front of you. (Anna, female befriender)

Alan wondered if this could be agreed beforehand:

Maybe bendifrinders could be trusted with a little bit more information which could be agreed with the befriender before meeting? (Alan, male befriender)

Joyce was more circumspect:

I think even a tiny bit of information like are they alone, but we don't need to know much as that can make a friendship difficult. (Joyce, female befriender)

This discussion illustrates the importance of addressing this issue in the training.

Theme 3: Building trust and providing support

Several bendifrinders talked about the high level of trust which they experienced with their bendifrinders:

You don't trust the people around you. When I talk to a friend in the centre about my problem, she'll tell everyone. The befrienders they're playing a big role, we get to trust them – they won't pass information on. (Tanya, F, Africa)

This also came up during a discussion around differentiating befriender and therapist roles:

A befriender is a friend I can open myself up to. A therapist is about my case – what affected me and what brought me to Ireland. A befriender wants to spend time with me and get to know me. That builds longer-lasting trust. (Tanya, F, Africa)

Joyce talked about the different ways in which trust could be developed naturally:

I found it easy to connect with her around faith – myself and my husband have different faiths so I understand different religions. Food and health also interested us both and trust built from there. (Joyce, female befriender)

The time taken to build up this trust was articulated by Kayla whose first befriender moved away:

It was like starting all over again but over time we built something and shared things I wouldn't share with others. (Kayla, F, Africa)

Befriendees evoked many practical supports founded on trust which their befrienders provided:

She helped me with things I didn't know how to do like healthcare and education. She's always in front of me helping me. I trust her. (Miremba, F, Africa)

Befrienders are also reported as providing support with the children:

My befriender helped me communicate with school staff and she takes the kids out to give us a break. (Tanya, F, Africa)

The importance of supporting befriendees in their navigation through the Irish asylum-seeking process was highlighted by several befriendees:

He helped me to understand the system and how to be in the interview. (Abdul, M, Asia)

Support with documentation was also important:

The documentation was a big deal. I was able to help with it which was really important cos it's so confusing (Mary, female befriender)

Yes to explain in simple English what the form means – it really helped. (Alan, male befriender)

This trusting and confidential relationship was also an important dimension of the fourth theme.

Theme 4: Combatting loneliness and protecting against suicide

Several befriendees talked candidly about their Spirasi befriender helping them to move from suicidal thoughts into a more hopeful less lonely space:

I'm alone here. I don't have anyone to talk to and she's so helpful. I stay next to her. I once wanted to commit suicide and Spirasi and my befriender helped me through the hardships. (Miremba, F, Africa)

The importance of the befriender in helping to combat feelings of loneliness was evoked by a number of befriendees:

I never feel alone since I got this befriender. Imagine my wife and kids in another country and me here and now my befriender makes me feel less alone. (Claude, M, Africa)

This participant evoked the strong sense of loneliness which could be experienced in communal living with many people around and the difference made by the befriender just being available:

Even though there are lots of people in the Direct Provision Centre¹ I felt really lonely until I accepted a befriender. Now I have someone who I can always call on for help when I'm not feeling good in my mind. (Muzhir, M, Asia)

The feelings of isolation in Direct Provision were also evoked by befrienders:

I think that loneliness is the biggest problem, even in Direct Provision where there are so many people. (Naomi, F, befriender)

Anna talked about times when loneliness was more strongly felt:

I know that certain times she can be especially lonely like her kids' birthdays so I always organise something for those days. (Anna, F, befriender)

Theme 5: Mutual kindness and reciprocity

Examples of reciprocity and mutual kindness were also strongly present in the befriending pair data, often involving food:

When we were coming out of lockdown (from Covid-19) we'd meet in the park and she would bring homemade cakes. From the beginning we would always bake for each other. (Anna, female befriender).

Anna also evoked the humanity which characterised their relationship from the beginning:

I was terribly impressed for my birthday when you asked your mother to get me a beautiful picture from your country. There was kindness and connection between us from the beginning. (Anna, female befriender)

Patrick talks about the tradition of bringing gifts which developed between himself and his befriendee:

Even when we meet in a café he always brings something - a packet of biscuits, little cake or sweets - you can't stop him. Just something small - it's the thought. (Patrick, male befriender)

All of the befrienders spoke about the privilege of being a part of the befriendee's life and how they gained so much from the relationship:

I feel extremely inspired by her- to hold down a job in another country, to stay mentally stable and still give to others - she's an inspiration to me and I definitely get more than I give. (Naomi, female befriender)

¹ Reception system for those seeking International protection in Ireland.

Anna also feels inspired by her befriender:

My befriender has an allotment and her mother sends her seeds and she's developed a little business. She's hugely inspirational and I feel honoured to be her friend. (Anna, female befriender)

Theme 6: Increasing the programme's scope and developing a community of practice

As well as this reciprocity within befriending pairs, bidders talked about wanting to share experiences and ideas with other bidders:

Maybe a message board where we could share things that have worked well. (Naomi, female befriender)

Good to be put in touch with other bidders because sometimes I might get asked a question which I don't know the answer to, and another befriender might know. (Alan, male befriender)

Mary suggested a buddy system:

A buddy system would be great - one person you could bounce ideas off - face to face or Zoom. (Mary, female befriender)

This pooling of resources could also expedite the expansion of the programme, a recommendation made by the bidders:

Everyone in Direct Provision needs Spirasi friends to talk to because we are dealing with real mental health struggles. Not every issue or incident must go to therapy but sometimes you have to talk to someone instead of bottling up because that's what's killing us. (Tanya, F, Africa)

Veronika suggests that Spirasi should go to all of the reception centres and explain the benefits of befriending:

I think if people knew how helpful it could be they would want to do it. (Veronika, F, Eastern Europe)

In addition to expanding the befriending programme, it was clear that the bidders participants had benefited from coming together as a group and were keen to meet again. Miremba suggested organising social events for bidders and bidders:

I've enjoyed meeting the others and it would be lovely if we could meet once or twice a year with our bidders too. (Miremba, F, Africa)

So strong was the desire to keep in touch as a group that they set up a WhatsApp group².

Portrait Workshop

The portrait workshop was facilitated by the artists and attended by seven befriending pairs, the author and Spirasi's befriending and psychosocial coordinators. The befriending pairs were asked to provide joint written feedback in response to the following questions, thereby including both voices:

- What did you enjoy about the workshop?
- How did it impact your befriending relationship?
- What are your ideas for future workshops?

Hyphenated pseudonyms ensured anonymity. Thirty-one categories relating to experiences of the portrait workshop were

² A messaging app that send messages, images, audio or video

identified across a combination of the responses to the questions and the author reflections and grouped into five themes:

- Theme 1 Deepening social connections
- Theme 2 Intercultural and creative exchanges
- Theme 3 A safe space
- Theme 4 Normality and acceptance in times of conflict and struggle
- Theme 5 Shared humanity and inclusivity

Theme 1: Deepening social connections

The importance of the workshop for deepening social connections was an experience shared by all participants:

A wonderful shared experience which felt very equal. It deepened our friendship and enriched our journey together. (Jane-Dembe)

This pair highlighted the value of sharing a creative experience together:

When you do special activities together it adds another layer of getting to know each other. It reinforced how much we have in common and how easy it is to be in each other's company. (Gillian-Zendaya)

Befriending pairs also made suggestions for other creative activities to ensure regular deeper connecting experiences:

Maybe a writer's workshop, where we're given random words to create a story about our experiences and dreams. (Diana-Nina)

Creative dance or movement, puppetry, cookery or a textile project. (Gillian-Zendaya)

Theme 2: Intercultural and creative exchanges

Gillian-Zendaya described the benefits of connecting people through intercultural and creative exchanges:

Amazing to be with people from other cultures and share creative experiences together (Gillian-Zendaya)

This was echoed by another befriending pair:

So wonderful to witness and experience the arts bringing people closer and forging connections. Strangers quickly become friends. (Andrea-Uma)

This deepening of social connections and validation of creativity was also in evidence in the creative exchanges which happened throughout the day, including at lunchtime where one of the befriendees shared, for the first time, some art which she had made from paper bags.

Theme 3: A safe space

The participants commented on how safe they felt throughout the day and Alison-Shyla linked this to group connections:

Being held so safely in the group, enabled us to go beyond the limits of two which was really special. (Alison-Shyla)

An environment of respect was also evoked:

The presence of artists who could guide as well as the researcher's warm empathic presence created safety and respect. (Jane-Dembe)

Participants also talked about feeling safe enough to produce art when they did not consider themselves artistic:

There was no pressure to create something conventionally perfect. (Andrea-Uma)

The creative process was also perceived as stimulating a sense of playfulness within the safety of the workshop:

What I liked most is that the process itself was effortless and playful. (Andrea-Uma)

Theme 4: Normality and acceptance in times of conflict and struggle

There was a strong feeling amongst the participants that the day took them out of their usual difficult lives and made them feel 'normal'.

That day we were all friends, I felt normal and accepted for being me. (Andrea-Uma)

This was echoed by Andrea-Uma who enjoyed the time away from everything:

The normality in the middle of our horrible lives struck me. We could forget, just for a day. (Andrea-Uma)

The room was filled with much activity and laughter and the intensity of the befriending pairs looking at each other's faces as if they were discovering one another for the first time was very powerful to observe.

Theme 5: Shared humanity and inclusion

Alexandra-Malia evoked the compassion of the workshop:

This workshop wove a deep thread of our shared and common humanity. (Alexandra-Malia)

Gillian-Zendaya articulated the felt sense of belonging:

We loved the equality and respect evident in the gentleness and inclusivity of this workshop. (Gillian-Zendaya)

Andrea-Uma described its humanity:

It was like we were all there together doing the same thing, all just human beings wanting the same things in life and I felt so welcomed and included. (Andrea-Uma)

Discussion

Main findings

For all of the participants, the themes identified in the focus group, interview and portrait workshop data firmly ground the Befriending Programme in Spirasi's holistic approach to recovery. Befrienderes participating in the focus groups articulated the importance of having access to all of the services and, of equal importance, of being signposted to the appropriate service in a compassionate way, which respected their agency whilst recognising the need for different parts of the service at different times. One befriender evoked the very powerful metaphor of the holistic approach to recovery as a clock with befriending as one of the vital moving parts.

Befrienders and befrienderes also clearly articulated that the programme encouraged the modelling and building of trusting, kind and reciprocal relationships, as well as helping to combat loneliness and protect against suicide. Befrienderes in one focus group agreed that they had grown to trust their befrienders more than their friends from the state-provided accommodation, whom they felt were likely to betray personal information. Several befrienderes also talked about how their befrienders had empowered them to see alternatives to suicide.

One of the themes identified for the befrienders was the need for regular, trauma-informed training and the development of a community of practice. Suggestions included refresher training just before the first meet up, quarterly drop-in sessions, more specialised training addressing specific issues and the provision of a handbook for befrienders. The amount of befriender background information which should be made available before the first meeting was identified as needing further consideration. Finally, the overall results of the focus groups suggest that for all participants, although the mission of the befriending programme of reducing isolation and loneliness, whilst providing support with integration into Irish society is being achieved, the demand for this service is far higher than current capacity can satisfy, and there is an urgent need to increase the scope of the programme by recruiting additional staff.

The portrait workshop evaluations illustrate the importance of sharing creative experiences to further strengthen relationships. Participants experienced strong connections being forged through spontaneous befriender art-sharing at lunchtime, and enjoyed getting to know other befriending pairs in a safe environment. The provision of a context of normality and acceptance in times of conflict and struggle and the experience of a shared humanity were evoked by many participants. Several described how they were able to forget about their everyday struggles and feel normal and accepted for a day. Befriending pairs described sharing creative experiences as adding another dimension to their friendships and were keen to engage in regular intercultural creative activities to develop deeper connecting experiences. The researcher's observations described a room filled with activity and laughter and the intensity of the befriending pairs discovering each other's faces.

Limitations of the research

Although this study is based on the experiences of 15 befrienderes and 16 befrienders from different regions of Ireland, which means that the findings are not representative of all befriending experiences for survivors of torture in Ireland, it provides a rich and in-depth exploration of participant experiences. Furthermore, the greater number of female befrienders in the befriending programme (78% of active befrienders are female), reflecting the prevalence of women in the Irish volunteering sector (Donoghue, 2001), means that there was a higher number of female focus group participants (11 females and 5 males). The participants were exclusively female in the portrait workshop, reflecting a typical pattern of greater female participation in community and therapeutic arts production contexts (Geue, et al., 2010). Given the finding that such activity can provide a restorative and validating experience, it is important to try to address this gender imbalance in future projects by actively encouraging male participation.

Although it is possible that the participants may not have been comfortable sharing feedback that was not positive in the context of the focus groups or the portrait debriefing when their partner was present, the potential advantages associated with the richness of the data to be elicited from the discussion generated in mixed composition focus groups were considered to outweigh any potential disadvantages. Furthermore, the befriender-only focus group was designed to provide the opportunity for befrienderes to voice their experiences of the programme without their befrienders being present.

There were some disparities between the expected number of focus group participants and the number who attended, including befrienderes who had not signed up, who there-

fore had to engage in the ethics process upon arrival. This reflects the complex lives of people seeking asylum and the need for flexibility by research teams working with such populations. In spite of these limitations, this in-depth exploration of befriender and befriendee experiences of the befriending programme through focus groups and the portrait workshop, provides important multi-layered data.

Recommendations and future research

This data then shaped the following ten recommendations. It is important to note that the research has led to the securing of additional funding which will ensure the concretisation of recommendations 1-4 through the appointment of an additional befriending staff member:

1. Continue the programme and recognise and develop its status as an important element in the holistic rehabilitation procedures for refugee survivors of torture.
2. Develop focused awareness-raising of the befriending programme.
3. Increase the scope and reach of the befriending programme to offer residents of all reception centres the opportunity for engagement.
4. Review the delivery methods and timeframe of the befriending training to ensure optimal delivery and retention of the training information by the benders.
5. Organise regular social events for groups of benders and their befriendees to deepen relationships, expand social networks and offer additional integration opportunities.
6. Develop a befinder handbook.
7. Set up a peer support service for benders to facilitate the sharing of experiences and the development of mutual empowerment.

8. Set up a befriending platform where benders can share ideas and resources to ensure the dissemination of best practice.
9. Review the optimum amount of information about potential befriendees which should be provided to benders.
10. Use expressive arts with benders and befriendees to build strong social connections and trusting relationships.

It is important to add that although the content of the initial training will still cover the Irish international protection process, the impact of trauma, guidelines for building relationships and maintaining boundaries, and the development of cultural awareness and humility, it was clear that participants wanted more regular training, the content of which would be informed by issues which arose for them during their befriending experiences. In addition, longitudinal research is needed to explore the aspects which lead to enduring friendships and integration opportunities as well as identifying those factors which may contribute to befriending relationship rupture.

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Note from Guest Editor (C.A.): Survivor Engagement can be understood as a spectrum of survivor participation such as the one established by the IRCT. The following article would not draw on more typical survivor engagement practices such as delegation of partnership with the survivors for service delivery, delegated organizational power on to the survivor, or survivor led or implemented activities. However, the survivor engagement spectrum of participation includes elements of survivor engagement practice from a 'therapy/client' role if the service provided is restoring the dignity of the survivor, if the survivor can access choice in the therapy or service accessed, if there is client consent on information storage and sharing, and so on. In this sense, the Guest Editor of the Torture Journal considered the inclusion of the present article as relevant for the section.