

“1 in 5 people have dandruff. 1 in 4 have mental health problems. I’ve had both”

Ruby Wax and many others are doing a great job of normalising mental health, the importance of talking, and encouraging people to seek help, but the reality of the availability of mental health support and sufficient qualified staff to deliver it, is creating an ever widening gap. New research from the NHS shows that almost a quarter of patients with mental health problems wait longer than 3 months for an appointment and the delays in receiving treatment leads to significant personal problems – relationships, financial troubles and problems at work. Over the past 5 years the number of psychiatric consultants has increased by just 3.3% in the NHS in England while consultants across the rest of the health service rose by 21%. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has launched a campaign urging medical students to specialise in mental health.

The challenges we are seeing in the adult population are reflected in the child’s experience of access to mental health services. The impact of the child’s home situation and family life cannot be underestimated – separation, bereavement, domestic violence, housing, parental drug and alcohol issues. In addition this generation of children are growing up in a world that is so altered from our own experiences of childhood. Where we were told not to talk to strangers, the virtual world presents unlimited opportunities to connect with people you may never meet. It gives access to children in their own personal space which often exposes them to harm and influence that they can’t control, and that those around them don’t know about. Social media images bombard young people with celebrity and status, the idealised body, the must have fashion, and the unattainable lifestyle, and judgement based on outward appearances and material assets. This breeds an expectation that cannot be fulfilled and a sense that happiness lies beyond them-selves.

So much “communication” is through the internet and mobile online, and too often the voice is silent. What grows from this is an acute sense of loneliness and isolation. In past years Richmond Council for Voluntary Service has hosted young administration apprentices in our office, and have found that almost all were scared of using the telephone, and found it incredibly difficult to initiate or receive an actual call. Conversation and interaction is an essential part of early years development, but in a world which is fast paced, where parents and carers work long hours or are facing considerable challenges, and where I Pads are used as a pacifier and a stimulus, many children are growing up devoid of “talking skills” and unable to read or respond to body language. I have a theory that much of the anger and frustration that we see in young people, which in the most extreme circumstances leads to catastrophic violence, stems from their lack of social communication skills and their inability to read a situation and react with an appropriate response –the rage against the machine has become a reality. In addition children are living in a world that is dangerous and scary, terrorist threats, random and brutal violence in their own neighbourhoods, the insecurity and fragility of safety. This coupled with the universal challenges of growing up – relationships and friendships, exam pressures, the unpredictability of their futures, even Brexit, all has an impact.

Off the Record sees all this and responds to it. It places the child at the heart of its activity, and meets the young people where they are, in their own local communities, in the way that they want. The expansion of the service into several local satellites and the development of

the one-off crisis counselling sessions has helped to reach more young people in the timescale that they need and in environments that they are comfortable in. The confidence with which GPs are referring to OTR is a demonstration of their belief in its efficacy, as well as a reflection of the ever growing need for support for young people that the NHS cannot meet, and which thresholds can't respond to. Parent feedback such as

“I felt an acute sense of relief that someone could help her when I couldn't”

sums up the difference OTR makes not just to their immediate beneficiaries, but all those who love and support them. For me the growth of the work in schools is particularly encouraging. Workshops covering subjects such as stress and anxiety, resilience and coping with transition have reached more than 500 young people in schools across the borough, helping to create a culture of peer support, practical tools and an understanding across the school community that it's good to talk, that you are not alone, and that we all have remarkable strengths inside us that will see us through.

The challenges that face charities like Off the Record will always be there – sustainable funding, affordable appropriate venues, the demand on services and the capacity amongst the workforce. However what Off the Record has achieved over the last few years is growth that is based on sound foundations and that is entirely constructed from understanding what will make the greatest difference to its beneficiaries. It recognises it cannot do this alone, and by raising its profile it reaches more people who need its help, and has created a community of supporters that will be part of its future. The leadership of the board with the support of the Young People's Advisory Group has been essential to its development and should be acknowledged.

In 1943 Anne Frank wrote

“Every-one has inside of them a piece of good news. The good news is that you don't know how great you are, how much love you can love, what you can accomplish, and what your potential is”

For hundreds of young people Off the Record enables them to discover their own good news, and to write their own headlines. As I said in this year's annual review

“Off the Record should not be viewed as the services it offers, but the lives and futures it makes possible. This is the overall effect of the difference Off the Record makes, and the change it makes possible in young lives”

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October 2018