

Bridging the Gap: Insights from Evaluating a Peer-Led Self-Injury Support Service

By Chandini Sree Venkataramani

The Self-Injury Service (SIS) has long been a lifeline for individuals navigating the complex and often isolating experience of self-injury. As a trainee counselling psychologist with a deep interest in mental health, I was drawn to the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of a service that blends lived experience with professional support. This blog post provides a glimpse into the work I conducted, evaluating SIS's peer-led post-Urgent Care/IAPT diversion service, which supports individuals who self-injure but do not meet the criteria for secondary care.

Since September 2023, I have been working part-time as a Researcher in Residence (RiR) funded by the Bristol, North Somerset, and South Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board (BNSSG ICB). In this role, I was embedded within the organisation to gain a deeper understanding on how peer-led services are transforming the mental health landscape by fostering connections rooted in shared experiences and empathy.

At the heart of SIS is a peer-led support model, where individuals with lived experience of self-injury offer empathetic, non-judgmental support to others. This approach is rooted in the belief that those who have "been there" can offer a unique and invaluable perspective. Throughout my evaluation, it became clear that this model not only fosters a deep sense of understanding but also breaks down power dynamics often present in traditional mental health services.

The evaluation, which ran from September 2023 to April 2024, involved gathering both qualitative and quantitative data from service users and staff. One of the most striking findings was the positive impact of the peer-led approach on service users. Many reported feeling truly understood and supported, something they had not always experienced in more traditional healthcare settings. This sense of connection and understanding was often attributed to the shared experiences between the peer practitioners and service users.

Another significant outcome was the immediacy and accessibility of the service. SIS ensures that contact is made with a service user within 72 hours of referral, offering a 90-minute appointment within a week. This quick response time was frequently highlighted as a critical factor in providing effective support, especially during times of crisis.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive feedback, the evaluation also uncovered some challenges. As a charity, SIS operates with limited resources, which sometimes affects the continuity of care. Service users expressed a desire for more sessions, highlighting the need for expanded capacity to meet growing demand. Additionally, while the peer-led model is highly valued, there are barriers to its implementation within broader healthcare settings. Role confusion and a lack of support for peer workers were noted as ongoing challenges that need to be addressed.

Moving Forward: Recommendations for the Future

The evaluation concluded with a few noteworthy recommendations aimed at enhancing the service:

1. **Expand Peer-Led Interventions:** Increase the recruitment and training of peer practitioners to ensure more individuals can access this vital support alongside their wrap-around care through their helplines.
2. **Increase Public Awareness:** Launch campaigns to educate both the public and healthcare professionals about the benefits of peer-led support for self-injury. For SIS to offer specialized workshops and support groups that focus on common underlying issues such as trauma, anxiety, and depression.

A notable limitation of this evaluation is the lack of input from statutory referrers, which has left us without a clear understanding of their experiences and challenges in connecting individuals to the Self-Injury Service (SIS). Addressing this gap could be an important focus for future evaluations, ensuring that the referral process is as effective and seamless as possible.

At the end of the project, the evaluation report was shared with the team, sparking an open discussion on the findings and helping to shape the next steps for the organisation's future direction

The evaluation of the Self-Injury Service underscores the transformative potential of peer-led support in mental health care. By prioritising lived experience and empathetic understanding, SIS provides a model that could serve as a blueprint for other services aiming to offer truly person-centred care. As we look to the future, it's clear that with continued investment and support, peer-led initiatives like SIS can play a pivotal role in the mental health landscape in the BNSSG region.

The Self-Injury Support Organisation can be accessed [here](#).

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