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Positive peer pressure

Youth counsel youth



The best people to talk to young people about drugs and/or alcohol could be other trained young people

In 1996 Paul Brown, the director of CADAS (the Cumbria Alcohol and Drug Advisory Service), realised that although there was clearly a drug problem among young people in the area, his service was not being utilised by them.

As part of his routine work with CADAS he had been going to schools to talk about drug and alcohol use. Teachers and parents asked him for advice about where to go to get help for their students and children who were harmfully involved with drugs. Sometimes they were desperate.

Unfortunately there was no specific provision in Cumbria for young people who wanted help with a problem of drug and/or alcohol use,

CADAS had a voluntary counselling service, but school-age children and young people were not using it. The records showed that the general age of people contacting CADAS for counselling was over 25. This was not altogether surprising, as the organisation had been set up as an adult service. But, a serious gap in provision for the area had clearly revealed itself.

Paul Brown did a survey of other organisations to see what they were doing for this age group and found a number of peer education projects in various parts of the country. Peer education was inspired by the recognition that young people will often listen to and respect other young people more readily than anyone else,

especially older people.

This is a normal, healthy phenomenon: the desire to be accepted among one's peer group, is a very influential force on a person. It is never more potent than during the adolescent years. More than that, when counsellors come from the same culture as their clients they have more credibility and a more genuine understanding of the issues to be faced.

It made sense to provide young people to work as counsellors with young people. But, first they would need to be trained.

The proposal was that CADAS should recruit and train young people to work as peer counsellors. These would be volunteers aged between

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16 and 25. They would be trained to make a service available directly to young people – to work with those who wanted to talk to someone in confidence and to deal with drug and/or alcohol problems.

Peer counselling was initially suggested as a joint project with the local youth service, which had an existing group of peer educators: young people who were trained to go into schools and youth groups. Some of these young people were part of the first group of trainees. The entire first group of trainees was identified with the co-operation of the County Youth Service.

Training

We were asked to train the peer counsellors. We each have ten years experience in counselling and psychotherapy using Transactional Analysis, the model CADAS had decided to work with. Lis was already supervising CADAS counsellors and John had over 20 years' experience of working with young people as an educational psychologist and psychotherapist.

At first we had 50 hours of course time, in which to train the young people in the most important principles. After that they could begin supervised practice. The course time has now been extended to 100 hours.

Our training philosophy sprang out of our belief that addiction is a psycho-physical phenomenon. It has physiological consequences, but has psychological origins.

Our working concept is that addiction is a pathological relationship with a mood altering substance or behaviour. People who do not have the experience of other people as a reliable source of comfort are more likely to turn to substances to give them what they want. The substances seem generally more reliable than the people in their lives.

Counselling offers a model of how to form a relationship in a potent and positive way with another person. The counselling relationship offers the opportunity of an alternative source of comfort. This is why it can help reduce dependence on drugs and alcohol.

Healthy relationship

What we aim to offer the young people as we train them is twofold: firstly the skills and concepts they will need to be

realistic and effective peer counsellors and secondly the experience of healthy relationship both with one another and with ourselves.

We hope to equip them to be able to offer the opportunity for a good relationship to clients who want to deal with their addiction problems. We do this through a combination of teaching, experience and supervised counselling practice.

Three counsellors from our first training course and five from the second are now at work. It has to be accepted that there is a fairly high dropout rate through the training and assessment process. It is a kind of natural selection. Motivation to do the training falls into two categories: those who are interested in developing a career in the helping professions, and those whose interest in working with drug and alcohol abuse comes from personal experience.

People discover on the way through the training whether they really want to do the work. Those that become volunteer counsellors are sure of their commitment by then. Once the training is complete the peer counsellors are offered regular professional supervision (one hour supervision to four hours counselling) to support their work. When they have completed 40 hours of counselling they can be accredited by the Volunteer Alcohol Counsellor Training Scheme (VACTS).

Results

The counsellors see young people under the age of 25, who are usually a few years younger than themselves. The youngest client so far has been 12. The outcome measure results for clients seen by the first group of peer counsellors in the period April 1998-April 1999 are very promising. The three counsellors saw 27 clients, the outcomes for whom were:

Health:	62.5 per cent showed a significant improvement
Alcohol use:	25 per cent showed a significant decrease
Drug use:	50 per cent showed a significant decrease
Personal life:	62.5 per cent showed a significant improvement
Social (occupation/interests):	50 per cent showed a significant improvement



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These results are based on client responses to self-report assessment scales completed at the beginning and end of the counselling period.

The Cumbria Drug Action Team audit for 1999 describes the CADAS Peer Education and Counselling Service as 'highly effective.'

Third course

We have just begun the third training course. The course was advertised through the local radio and papers and, with the help of a newly appointed youth development worker, we ran a very useful selection day. As a result, we have recruited 12 new young people from all over the county.

The Cumbria DAT has been supportive of this project and has provided increased resources; they have been a catalyst for many positive strategic developments.

CADAS is seen as a key agency at a local level in delivering the Government's strategy.

A support programme has recently been established for the existing peer counsellors, so they will be able to meet, share their experiences and do more training together. Training is continually reviewed, and improvements are made, in the light of experience and feedback from the people involved.

Based on feedback, we feel positive that this approach works and are enthusiastic and optimistic about the future.

Our hope is that these young people will go among their peers in their communities and make the kind of difference that older, more experienced people have found difficult to achieve ■