

Setting Up a Drop-In Session

Setting up drop-in sessions to support those with mental health challenges is key to the mission of Being Alongside as a charity. We see it as a way to live out the Christian gospel message to love our neighbour and to ensure nobody feels excluded from society. We value the individual whatever their needs or challenges, believing that all are made in God's image and that we have a responsibility to walk alongside one another.

We therefore promote the running of informal drop-in sessions within the community as a way to offer support and alleviate loneliness and isolation. Through a desire to embody these principles, we hope you will consider setting up a drop-in session in your own community. We offer the following pointers to help you as you consider what will work best in your setting.

- **NEED:** Establish what the need is in your area. Mental health challenges (whether diagnosed or not) are currently so prevalent in our society that you are unlikely to be treading on the toes of other organisations. That said, it makes sense to evaluate what is already available locally.
- **VISION:** Gather together a few people who share a vision to support those with mental health challenges and consider how this might be done in your context. Ensure all those involved in overseeing and running sessions understand the motivation and vision of the drop-in – i.e that they are walking alongside people, able to signpost them to services that might support them, but that it is not a support group for those in crisis. You may wish to run a very simple drop-in offering a cup of tea or you may wish to offer a wider range of services or activities.
- **PUBLICITY:** Advertise your sessions in appropriate settings such as community noticeboards, publications and on local social media sites. Contact your local GP surgeries as well as NHS Social Prescriber/Social Workers who may also help to spread the word.
- **VENUE:** Choose a venue that is easily accessible, warm, comfortable and with facilities to provide refreshments. A church or community centre may offer this free of charge. Consider how you will make the group and venue welcoming and non-threatening to those who are likely to initially feel anxious.
- **GROWTH:** Remember that Drop-In sessions are often organic and form and grow slowly. People may drop in intentionally or when passing by; dip their toe in the water and as a result word will spread. How your sessions function may become clearer over time. Be flexible and remember, small can be beautiful!
- **GOVERNANCE:** Depending on the size of your venture, you may wish to set up a Committee to oversee the management. If so, encourage those who attend sessions to become part of this too. A Health & Safety and a Risk Assessment should be completed before any sessions run, and all volunteers should be aware

of the content. Ensure there are always at least two people to run a session and that all volunteers understand their safeguarding responsibilities (see separate Factsheet) to protect both themselves and any vulnerable attendees.

- **RULES:** It can be helpful to display a list of expected standards of behaviour at sessions to avoid misunderstandings around, for example, smoking, alcohol, confidentiality and boundaries.
- **CONTENT:** Consider whether you are simply offering a warm, friendly and supportive space for those who might feel isolated or lonely by the challenges of life, or whether you wish to offer further services at some/all sessions or at other times. You may wish to advertise particular talks, workshops or activities (mindfulness, community choirs, group counselling/talking therapy provided by other charities) or set up such initiatives later on.
- **ETHOS:** Try to avoid a culture of “them” and “us”. For example, you could encourage attendees to serve refreshments and to support one another. Doing things *with* people rather than *for* people (craft activities, board games, crosswords) promotes a more equal relationship. Presence and a willingness to listen can be all that is necessary.
- **SERVICE PROVIDERS:** Consider whether you wish to invite “service-providers” to attend the sessions on a regular or occasional basis. NHS social prescribers can be a really valuable presence as well as national charities such as MIND, local mental health charities/support services or people/charities offering free or low-cost counselling services.
- **VOLUNTEERS:** Ensure you have a bank of enough people to run sessions, to open up and lock up, to serve and provide refreshments, and especially to be available to interact with those who attend in a relaxed, friendly way. A variety of backgrounds, genders and ages can be helpful among volunteers well as those who value the spiritual dimension of life. A ratio of 1 volunteer to approx 5 attendees works well and a pre-planned rota of volunteers is recommended. Offering time approximately monthly tends to be sustainable for most volunteers. Ensure your volunteers know what is and is not expected of them in advance and how to access support for themselves should they need it.
- **COST:** Evaluate what it will cost to run your sessions (venue, heating, refreshment costs) and how you will resource this (grants, donations or fundraising). A small nominal or voluntary charge/donation for refreshments can promote dignity and self-respect. Being Alongside is currently offering small grants to assist with setting up Drop-In services so please contact admin@beingalongside.org.uk if you would like further information about this.

And remember..... the challenges to everyone’s mental health these days are considerable, whether we have a diagnosed condition or not. What we can offer is a drop in the ocean but compassion, hospitality and kindness is the message of the Gospel and needed everywhere. Remember the story about the boy on the beach putting stranded starfish back into the sea “if it helped one starfish”, he said, “it was worth it”.