

## **How does the Self Injury Self Help group work? FAQ's for SISH volunteers**

### **Why was the SISH (Self Injury Self Help) group started in the first place?**

The SISH group was first thought of at a National Self Harm Network conference held in London about 15 years ago. This was a conference where only people with personal experience of self injury were invited, during which Bristol was identified as a city which could benefit from an independent self help group.

### **Why self help?**

At the time SISH was formed self injury was traditionally often viewed as a behaviour that was wrong, and that stopping people from hurting themselves was the only way to help. The original founders of the group felt strongly that this approach didn't reflect how they felt about their self injury, or value how important it was to them as a coping strategy. It was because of this that they decided to create their own space to talk about what meaning and relevance their self injury had for them, and offer and receive support from peers that was non-judgemental and accepting. The group has run with these core principles ever since, and is unique within Bristol for it's approach.

### **What is counted as self injury?**

Anything that a person views as self injury! SISH is not about defining what individuals do, and we don't have a hierarchy of types of self injury. If someone wants to come to the group they are more than welcome. In the past members have attended the group who are actively self injuring, dealing with scars relating to past self injury, or concerned that they are having worrying thoughts that they might hurt themselves in some way. Whatever the individual is concerned about, SISH and will be there for them.

### **What do group members talk about?**

Self injury might be the expected answer, but the reality can be very different in practice. Often self injury is the core issue that brings participants to the group, so sharing experience, offering support, tips for harm minimisation, worries about scars, fears about talking to family members, experience with services, etc. all come up frequently and can be openly and honestly talked about. However, each session is different, and often other issues in the day-to-day experiences of participants come up. Everything from housing, relationship issues, sexual problems, suicidal thoughts, frustrations with partners, childhood abuse experiences and work stresses are up for debate, and the role of the facilitator is to follow the group, accepting where each group member is at that time. There is plenty of warmth and light hearted moments too.

### **So what is my role as a facilitator?**

To remember that the emphasis is on peer support, not therapy. To listen, support, accept and validate the group members equally. To help individual members share, whilst respecting when someone needs to stay quiet. To encourage mutual support and foster the self-help ethos of the group. To hear members experiences without judgement or needing to change their feelings or behaviours. To accept that, as an open group, members use the space as they feel necessary and do not have to commit to attendance or let you know about any absences.

### **And how does this fit with my co-facilitators?**

Both SISH self help groups are run in teams of 3 facilitators. This means that you will have a small team to share the responsibility of both the facilitation and the more practical tasks associated with running the group. You will frequently work in pairs during a group session, but also (if you feel confident) can cover each other for holidays, unexpected sickness etc. How you work together as a team will be developed over time, supported by the regular group supervision provided by the SISH self help group supervisor.

### **Does the group have any rules?**

We have tried to keep the ground rules as simple and straightforward as possible. As a small self help group we are able (both ethically and legally) to choose to work with minimum policies – a benefit of the group which past participants have really appreciated. We run through the ground rules when a new member attends, a process usually owned by the group. They are:

- Members need to be well enough to both offer and receive support when they attend the group. It is a self help group, not a crisis service
- Everyone's experience will be listened to, valued and respected
- We ask members not to self injure whilst in the group
- The group is run with everyone's commitment to complete confidentiality

Other than these 4 ground rules, we try to work with each situation as it arises, learning on the way. For example, some groups have written rules about what to do when someone is very distressed, but as we have experienced this as having both positive and negative impacts for the group we prefer to treat each situation as new, using peer support and supervision to work our way through any issues arising.

### **Will SISH ever breach confidentiality?**

We have been able to set very high levels of confidentiality for the self help group, and have been given the feedback that this is one of the reasons members feel safe to come back time and time again. This can be one of the most challenging parts of facilitating the group, especially if you are listening to a lot of feelings around suicide, for example. The ground rule of complete confidentiality continues to apply, even where child protection or vulnerable adult concerns are raised. Supervision and peer support is integral here, and it is really important that you use the systems in place to talk through concerns and get support for yourself when you feel worried about someone's individual safety.

The **only** exception to complete confidentiality is when the group safety is challenged by an individual group member. If, at group session, you and the group are very worried that a member may need immediate medical attention, or are concerned that there is a threat of danger due to an individual's behaviour, it is necessary and appropriate for you to phone the police or ambulance services. These circumstances are extremely rare, and if you find yourself in this situation it will be important to get hold of any available SISH supervisor, facilitator or steering group member for immediate support and an opportunity to de-brief.

### **What if I have worries about an individual who I feel is having a negative impact on the group?**

Again, using the supervision and support available in a pro-active way would be the first step. Talk to your co-facilitator and make contact with the SISH self help supervisor to talk through any problems as you see them. Is there a way of helping the person use the group more effectively? Is there something in your response to the person that is maybe making it difficult for you to empathise with them? What strategies can you and your co-facilitator use to maintain group safety whilst bringing the person you have concerns for into the group in a positive way?

If these strategies don't work the SISH team will collectively make a decision about whether or not it is the right time for the member to be using the group, using the ground rule:

“Members need to be well enough to both offer and receive support when they attend the group. It is a self help group, not a crisis service”

as a guide. Very occasionally it may be that a member is asked not to return to the group as they are unable (at this point in time) to use the space within the ground rules agreed to. This responsibility for this decision will be taken jointly by SISH, and risk assessment and safety planning put in place before the individual is approached by 2 members of the SISH team to discuss the situation further. Again, this situation is extremely rare, but it feels important that, as a team, we have considered the possibility and how we would approach the situation, for the wellbeing of the individual person, the group and the self help group facilitators.

### **What are the practical arrangements for running the group?**

The self help groups run from 6.30 – 8pm. As a facilitator you will need to arrive at 6.15 to set up the room, start getting teas and coffees ready, and maybe greet a new member who has arranged to come a bit early in order to feel confident to join the group. The groups start and close with a mini mindfulness exercise – what happens in the middle is entirely up to the group! Ending on time is really important for all concerned.

### **What monitoring tasks will I need to complete**

You will be asked to fill out a brief monitoring form at the end of each session – just saying who was present (first names only, or totally anonymous e.g. A Member), as well as recording how frequently the person has been attending (first time, 2 – 4 sessions, regular member, returning member etc.). We also collect non identifying information on the range of topics discussed – e.g. self esteem, visits to accident and emergency, dealing with family members

New members will be given a 'self care pack', which has a short anonymous monitoring questionnaire they can choose to complete and bring back, or post if they choose not to return.

Occasionally group members will be asked if they are willing to complete further monitoring, with the message that these are completely voluntary.

### **How often will I be expected to respond to SISH self help phone calls?**

Generally speaking the SISH self help group facilitators for both the women only and mixed gender groups share responsibility for responding to telephone calls. The facilitators take it in turns to hold the phone and message book, checking the phone 2 or 3 times per week and following up messages left through to a successful conclusion. We get similar amounts of enquiries from individuals and support services about the groups, so you will need to be able to commit a small amount of time each week to make contact with a variety of people.

Some important things to remember about the phone are:

- You don't need to keep the phone on all the time – SISH is not a crisis service, and the phone is there purely to provide an avenue for potential members to be in touch with the group. This is made clear by the message callers receive when they leave a message.
- It can be hard to make contact with people by phone, so you may need to be persistent.
- It is important to be discrete when leaving messages on answering services. Some people will want to keep their potential involvement with the group confidential from the people they live or work with.
- If you receive a distressing message, get support for yourself, and don't feel pressured into responding to it as a crisis call.
- Remember to share the responsibility of the phone, and regularly change over this task with your co-facilitators.

Additionally, SISH is in the process of developing a simple website, and it is anticipated that many enquiries will come, and be responded to, via email, managed by another SISH steering group member.

### **What supervision will I get to support my work as a SISH self help group facilitator?**

The 4 volunteer self help group facilitators will be offered 10 group supervision sessions together during the course of 1 year. These sessions will be 1 ½ hours in duration, and provided by a qualified supervisor with a broad range of experience, including past experience of facilitating the women only self help group. A commitment to attending supervision is a requirement of undertaking the role of volunteer facilitator, and it is seen as a vital part of the safe development of the groups for all concerned. These sessions will provide a supportive space where problems can be discussed and solutions shared, the impact of the work on facilitators heard and validated, and provide a coherent voice for the continued development of good practice within the groups. Individual telephone supervision is also available for more immediate support when necessary.

### **Where do I fit in to the wider SISH structure?**

As a non-hierarchical peer-led organisation you are welcome to become involved with the wider business of the SISH steering group. It very much depends on how much time you have and how much you want to be involved. We tend to have steering core meetings every 4 – 6 weeks and any and all participation is welcome and valued!