

A Message from the Chair

As I write this, global events are causing individuals in many countries to face profound crises created by forces outside their control. These are in addition to the very real crises resulting from the extremes of the human condition. In this context, Befrienders Worldwide is a very precious organisation. We bind together like-minded people and try to make the lives of those with whom we come into contact a little more bearable. Our organisation is proof that we can share values and cooperate for greater human good and by doing so reduce the incidence of suicide. Sadly, events suggest demand for the services of BW members is likely to increase in the months ahead. Thank you for all that you are doing.

Against this highly demanding backdrop, there are a number of developments at BW that I would like to highlight:

BW is in the process of reviewing its digital presence, website and ability to network with members. This is a review that is likely to take a few months but we are hopeful that the outcomes will be positive for those in crisis and for BW member organisations. On a related point, thank you to those centres who have engaged with the training that BW has been able to offer from Samaritans UK. It is great to hear of the support that centres in different countries have been giving to each other. Such training can give great confidence to volunteers as well as being a chance to reflect on current practice. ahead.

Thank you for the time and energy that is being put into this. BW's support for Seafarers continues to develop. A great deal of work is being done by each of the centres involved and use of the service is growing month by month. BW is extremely grateful to the centres involved and is actively seeking means to increase the scope of the service in the months ahead. In addition to this, the Board of Trustees is reviewing BW activities to identify the most productive and efficient means further to support and connect members. More information on this will follow in the months.

To close, I would once again like to thank you for all you are doing to support those in crisis. The skills required are many, the work is demanding and the time given by BW members is profoundly moving. Thank you.

Neil Hawkins

24.02.22

Contents of Newsletter

1. A message from the Chair
2. The spirit of Ngay Mai
3. Article by Heather Barker on Befrienders Worldwide- A journey
4. The Community Help Service- Their Role in Belgium
5. E-Learning Training – Update
6. Latest data from the Seafarers International Emotional Support Service.

To contact us:

To submit articles or information for the newsletter, please contact communications@befrienders.org

Befrienders Worldwide

March 2022

BW Newest member Ngay Mai Hanoi Vietnam Tomorrow is a New Day

Exactly 2 min after the time hotline Ngay Mai (Tomorrow) officially launched, the phone rang, signaling the first call. On the other side of the line was a middle-aged man, calling from the South Central region. This was a good sign, for it is quite rare, even now, for someone of that age who doesn't live in a big city to overcome the stigma of talking about their depression.

In Vietnam, the topics of mental health and psychological disorders are still largely taboo, never to be mentioned in public. Thus, it has been a satisfaction, a privilege, and an honor for the Ngay Mai team to consistently receive calls day after day after that very first call. While many still hesitate to call for immediate support, they have slowly found comfort in reaching out via alternative channels, such as emailing or direct messaging the Ngay Mai fan page on Facebook.

In order to raise public awareness and promote engagement, Ngay Mai has organized multiple series of social media campaigns and educational workshops that explore different aspects of personal mental healthcare. As a result, there has been a steady increase of callers, now more open to sharing their problems with the hotline volunteers. Despite working on limited hours per day, five days per week, due to financial constraints, during the past nine months, Ngay Mai has serviced over 1000 calls from those in need all over Vietnam. With their age ranging mainly from 20 to 35 years old, callers phone in to receive support on a wide variety of issues, such as couple's and family concerns (over 50%), workplace dynamics (20%), COVID-19-related problems (15%) and more.



Operating a public mental health support hotline requires a dedicated team of enthusiastic volunteers. The majority of Ngay Mai's call operators have an educational background in psychology or social work. Additionally, all volunteers underwent 40 hours of professional training before officially staffing the hotline. Monthly shift discussions are organized as a platform for operators to debrief challenging cases, exchange tips and tools, as well as perform routine quality checks. However, the biggest surprise is how much the spirit of the community has grown amongst hotline volunteers. Beyond professional obligations, members actively take interest and engage in supporting one another on a personal level. This was most apparent during the arduous months of Hanoi's city-wide social distancing, when Ngay Mai managed to stay in operation in spite of how many, including project volunteers, struggled with personal difficulties.

The name Ngay Mai comes from the idea that before hanging up, volunteers would invite the caller to phone in again "tomorrow" to make sure that they are alright. Knowing that there is someone who cares enough to wait and check in can help those who are struggling feel less alone, as well as gain strength to not give up during dark times. Indeed, tomorrow will always be a chance to start anew and move forward.



The spirit of Ngay Mai

Befriending Worldwide – a journey



Heather joined Central London Samaritans as a Listening Volunteer when she first came to work in London in 1971. During her Samaritan journey she has been involved in many different aspects of “Samaritan life” – but closest to her heart has been the opportunity to get to know and work with Befrienders around the world.

In the years that followed the founding of Samaritans in the London in 1953, awareness of the value of befriending and the “Listening Therapy” spread quickly – not only within the UK but also around the world.

By 1974, there were “Samaritan” branches in nine different countries. Some of these were groups that had been started by individuals with direct experience of the ways in which Samaritans operate; others were organisations that were already established and were offering emotional support. They recognised the value offering support that allows “me to be me” and is non-judgemental and doesn’t give advice - and wanted to know more and be involved in a wider movement.

In 1974, twenty one years after the Samaritans were “born” in the UK, Chad Varah and a small dedicated (and very enthusiastic) group of volunteers gathered at St. Stephen Walbrook London to form Befrienders International – an umbrella organisation that aimed to support the work of the individual branches as well as national organisations. Importantly, BI was established to support not direct and support was offered in lots of different ways.

For example there was a “twinning programme” where branches in the UK / Ireland were twinned with branches around the world – often offering mutual support as well as conferences at which members of the BI family could meet together. Training and support was also often provided in person by Samaritan volunteers travelling to countries. I was privileged to have the opportunity to visit branches in India, Sri Lanka, Cairo, Khartoum, Hong Kong and the USA. Wherever, I went it felt like being a member of an amazing family. I was truly humbled by my experiences – and I learned so much!

Over the years, BI grew, and the small group of volunteers, based in a borrowed office in Bishopsgate London needed reinforcements. They were joined by a small staff team whose role was to take the work of BI forward. The team focused on supporting the core work of the national organisations and branches and recruiting new members. Further, they began to look at wider international projects that could extend further the work of BI.



With a staff team in place and increasing levels of work, the challenge for BI was securing funding as well as having “somewhere to live”. As we all know, it is always much more difficult to raise funds for an umbrella organisation than for an organisation that is delivering services. While the team tried to develop and deliver wider programmes with a potential to raise much needed funds, this did not work out in practice, and in 2010 BI ceased to exist. But it was only BI as an organisation that ceased to exist – and individual branches and national organisations continued to offer emotional support to those in distress.

Initially the core work that had been such an important part of the work of BI was supported by a small team of volunteers from the Samaritans UK & Ireland. Then in 2012, Befrienders Worldwide as established. Led by volunteers, BW reflects the original aims of Befrienders International. It exists to assist member Centres in providing appropriate emotional support for people who are suicidal and/or in distress. Importantly, members of BW are united by a common goal, common values and principles.

As Chad once put it, our work is based on the belief that a well-trained lay person (volunteer) is in the best position to “befriend” many of those in crisis - by providing an immediate and caring response steeped in empathetic listening. This is what takes place every day in centres around the world.

The Community Help Service (CHS) - Our Role in Belgium

In 2021, the CHS celebrated (albeit extremely quietly due to COVID) its 50th Anniversary of supporting the English-speaking community in Belgium. Established with the active support of the English-speaking pastoral community in Belgium, the initial goal of the CHS was to provide practical support to British and American expatriates coming to live and work in Belgium. Back then, in the days before the UK had even joined the European Union, the focus was on where to find an English-speaking tradesman, dentist or doctor.

Since then, the CHS has grown and evolved. Today, it comprises two distinct services both supported by an active volunteer network. The Mental Health Services Centre (MHSC) brings together a group of nineteen mental health practitioners – psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and psychotherapists who provide services to a wide range of individuals. Divided into two teams – one for children and adolescents and one for adults – the MHSC is a vital part of the community.

In 2021, we received calls from over 1,400 people to receive appointments representing over 40 different nationalities although it's fair to say that UK, US and Belgians (which includes an increasing number of British people post Brexit) account for roughly 30% of this number. Needless to say, the COVID pandemic has placed huge strains on our team with appointment requests increasing by 33% since last year. Inevitably, a proportion of these callers cannot be seen in house and so they are provided with the contact details of other practitioners and mental health centres.



Our other principal activity and one which dates back to 1971 is our Helpline. We currently have 24 volunteers who are supervised and supported by two psychologists. Our Helpline is anonymous, confidential and free and supports the English-speaking community in Belgium. Given Brussels' role as the so-called "Capital of Europe", there are very many people here who have English as a second or even third language. Although the Belgian government provides similar Helplines for the French, Flemish and German-speaking communities, we find that an increasing number of Belgians are contacting both the Helpline and the MHSC.

As with the MHSC, 2021 was another record-breaking year for the Helpline taking nearly 7,000 calls – a 50% increase over 2020. One of our biggest challenges this year has been a fundamental rethink of our telephone service switching from Proximus (which continues to be majority owned by the Belgian state) to Destiny Mobile. Now each of our Helpline volunteers has a dedicated Smartphone and SIM card connected to the Destiny network. Whilst the changeover was not without its challenges, the quality of the data we now receive from Destiny is great. For example, on average, our volunteers spend 80 hours a month talking to callers to the Helpline. Nearly 90% of calls to the Helpline come from mobile phones and roughly 20% of calls to the Helpline come from people not living in Belgium. This was a real eye-opener for many of us and demonstrates the global reach that the CHS enjoys.

It is also clear from the statistics that a small number of individuals rely on the CHS Helpline as a Lifeline. They call the Helpline multiple times a day which places an extra strain on the system. Although we can now place limits on the number of calls to be accepted each day from these callers, they still account for roughly 30% of all calls.

Our analysis of calls by time of day indicates, not surprisingly, that calls tend to peak around 1.00pm, 7.00pm and 10.00pm. In future, and depending on our volunteer resource, we might consider having multiple volunteers on these "busy" shifts, something we could not do with the old system. However, an analysis of average call duration by hour provides further interesting data. The longest calls to the Helpline are those received between midnight and 4.00am – nearly three times as long as a call at other times of the day. Such calls tend to be from callers in significant distress which is why our more experienced volunteers tend to cover night shifts. Over 90% of our callers are either looking for mental support or are severely distressed. The remaining percentage are looking for practical information on life in Belgium, the service we started over 50 years ago!

We are always glad to hear from those who might be interested in volunteering, whether with the Helpline or to work in the Offices at the CHS mental health centre in Brussels. We are also delighted to be a part of the Befrienders Worldwide network once again.

E-Learning Update

The E-Learning core development training is taking place amongst BW members in a slow and gradual way.

BW is very grateful to Samaritans UK/ROI for the time and commitment to assist BW with this important core development training. Reports that we have received back from those centres that have undertaken the training are very positive.

We are very grateful for the help that CHS Belgium have provided BW from their resident trainer Simon Dwyer, who has provided BW with an outline of how CHS are carrying out their training. Simon is a qualified psychologist who specialises in occupational psychology.

Simon has provided BW with valuable feedback on how the training has been implemented at CHS and this information has been passed onto other centres who are embarking on the E-Learning.

Simon has been very positive about the training and lists the advantages below:

1. It gets everyone to a constant level
2. It provides those taking the training the essential skill to be a listener.
3. It sets expectations for the volunteer group.
4. It has a very good assessment tool which is intuitive and not lengthy.
5. All the training can be done online.
6. The training can be very easily adapted to ensure that any cultural differences can be added to the training material.

BW also feels that in terms of assessing a centres emotional support capabilities it provides a good platform for self-assessment.

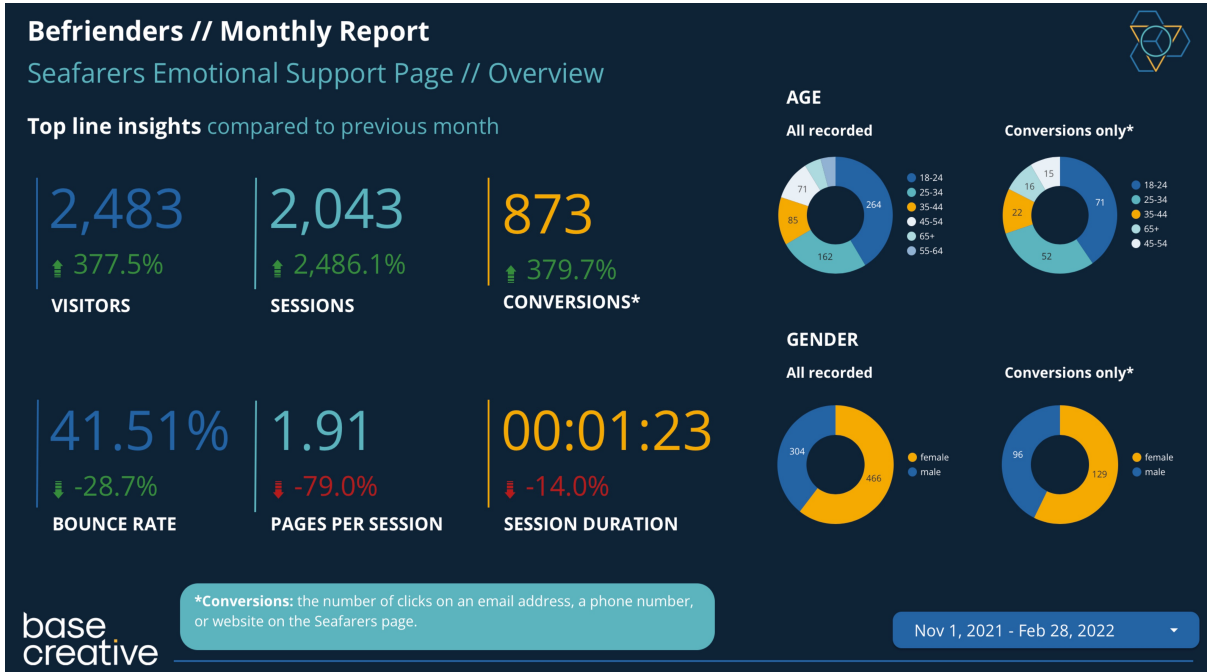
One of the key fundamentals that all centres should do is seek trainers who have the right skills sets to deliver the training before implementing the training across the organisation. Training the Trainers is a prerequisite for a successful role out of the training.

BW is working with Samaritans UK/ROI to have a certificate of achievement provided to all those that have fully completed the training.

BW would encourage more centres to look at this new and exciting training and consider adopting it.

Seafarers International Emotional Support Service

The launch of the seafarers emotional support service is progressing very well with close to 2,500 visits to the site since the service was launched 1st November 2021.



The conversion rate is consistently around 35% meaning that visitors to the site either click on the website or click on the phone number to make contact. At the time of writing our 4 Seafarers Support centres have received 493 connections seeking emotional support.

BW is planning to add another centre to the group to cater for a social media platform. More details will follow when the service is operating.

BW wishes to express a grateful vote of thanks for our SIESS centres especially for their dedication and commitment to helping seafarers in distress.