



Protecting wellbeing: A guide for befrienders

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By signing up to become a befriender...



you are joining a national mission to reduce social isolation and loneliness in our communities by creating connections. Regular social interaction can help to build confidence, self-esteem and structure for someone, amongst many other positive outcomes. Befriending projects could not function without people like you. The work of a befriender can make a difference and this document is designed to support you to achieve the most out of your role.

Whether you have joined a grassroots project, a small community or a national campaign: thank you for taking the time to support others and to make a difference. It is important that you protect, help and support your wellbeing too. This guide is here to illustrate the several ways that you can achieve this:

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(1) Know your limitations; (2) Supporting others; (3) Signpost; (4) Respect Boundaries; (5) Have realistic expectations; (6) Protecting your mental wellbeing; (7) Safeguard and manage risk.





Step 1: Know Your Limitations



Know Your Limitations

It is natural to want to help. This is called being empathetic. Empathy is a key skill for befrienders: It is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another with sensitivity. This said you need to know your limitations, as well as the limitations of the role and responsibilities of a befriender. It is important to be able to admit when you are in too deep. If you are struggling in any way, please be transparent with the project staff. Transparency will better support you, the service user and the organisation.

If at any point you have concerns over the wellbeing or safety of your match, you must communicate this with your volunteer coordinator/line manager. There is no shame in stating that you do not know what to do or how to handle a situation. Training and guidance as a befriender should inform you of this and there should be a clear procedure outline given to you, either as an explanation or in your volunteer handbook. Although all organisations will vary on specifics: If you are struggling, speak to a member of staff from the organisation as soon as possible.





Step 02

Supporting Others



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Supporting Others



As a befriender, you will have direct access to the service user and your primary role will be to support them. This support may be delivered by taking the time to talk to them, assisting them with outings in the community or it could be assisting them to carry out hobbies.

Monitor and evaluate the wellbeing of your match(es) and ensure to alert your coordinator if you notice a deterioration or factors of concern. Rather than spend time being worried or stressed about what you can do or trying to help in ways not related to your role, it is best for you to discuss this with your point of contact in the organisation and allow them to take any necessary steps. Staff will be able to guide how best to support others in any given situation.



Step 03

Signpost





Signpost

What does the term mean?

The term signposting means to direct someone to another service or organisation. For example, you may not be a legal expert but your match needs advice. In this situation, you could help them access legal aid by giving them the phone number, and website or accompanying them into town if the befriending service is delivering a physical service.

How do we do it?

Signposting is acting with the wellbeing of another in focus. Signposting is not abandoning or 'passing the buck', rather it is ensuring the person gains access to the best resource possible. Explain what is available, speak positively of the service, and highlight that befriending may continue. Signposting can help deal with a certain element of the service user's life, for example, a bereavement, and befriending can remain a social support for the other elements simultaneously if appropriate.

Why is signposting the best move?

Signposting can be the best step in many situations. For example: wellbeing; mental health; bereavement; housing; human rights; or specialist care to name a few. There are many organisations in the UK that people can access by phone, in person or online. Rather than try to study and learn about a topic and potentially get it wrong, signpost your match to an expert on the topic to ensure they get the best care and support possible.



Step 4

Respect Boundaries





Respect Boundaries

'The bread and butter
of befriending'

One of the best ways to protect your wellbeing is to respect the boundaries. Your organisation will have a boundary policy and procedure which will highlight a code of conduct and guidelines. For example, whether physical contact or exchange of money is allowed.



Boundaries are in place to protect the welfare of the organisation, the befriender and that of the service user. It is important to respect and to follow them to ensure everyone stays safe and that everyone can understand what is expected of them.



Step 5

Have realistic expectations

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Expectations vs. Reality

It is crucial that you
understand the reality...

It is crucial that you understand the reality of being a befriender from the beginning so that your expectations are accurate allowing you to avoid being overwhelmed or disappointed.

As we advocate that all service users should be given a clear outline of what the service is and what it is not, Befriending Networks also advocates that befrienders have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities too.

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If you are unsure of what your role entails, ask a member of staff within your project to help. Just as a job comes with a job description, befriending should come with a clear outline of the role. Factors such as time commitment, tasks, responsibilities, confidentiality etc. should be outlined to you. If you have not received this, please request it from the organisation to read or discuss so that your expectations match with reality.





Step 6: Protect Your Mental Wellbeing



According to HSE...

The biggest cause of staff turnover is stress. This fact could easily apply to volunteering too. Stress can affect people's mood, appetite and sleep pattern which in affect can be highly negative on your mental wellbeing. You need to be honest with both yourself and the staff team, such as a Volunteer Coordinator. If you're struggling, please do say so.

While befriending, there can be many things which may alter your mental wellbeing. For example, you may be finding the commitment too much, grieving or struggling with specific factors of the match that cause you to need some time off.

Remember:

It is important to recognise your emotions and wellbeing. If you feel your mental wellbeing is in jeopardy or at risk of being so, either:

- a) speak to your coordinator immediately
- b) use your next support and supervision to talk it through





Step 07

Safeguard and manage risk



Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility

If you are working 1:1 with your service user, you must be aware of your **lone working policy** and procedure. Within befriending and providing social support to your match, the right to confidentiality is not absolute. As a befriender, you need to work in partnership with the befriending project to ensure there is a high level of safety and transparency around risk.



Risk management can vary across befriending projects. For some organisations, it may mean checking in with your coordinator via text at the start and end of your befriending meeting, for other organisations it will entail only meeting at agreed locations within office hours. Not certain about the safety procedures in place within your befriending project? Ask questions if you are ever unsure. Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility – ensure you are aware of your role.

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Risk assessments will be carried out within the organisation to evaluate any potential dangers and to action on the precautions and steps that can be put into place to ensure your safety. Staff will highlight any risks, concerns or guidance to best support your match in advance and ensure you carry out your role in safeguarding.

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility

Safeguarding is also your direct duty as a befriender. As a befriender, you have a duty of care to inform your line manager if you are made aware of anything of concern while spending time with a service user. Your **confidentiality agreement** will clarify this: everything you are told by your match is to remain confidential – though sharing relevant information with the right people at the right time is vital to good safeguarding practice.



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E.g., if you are informed by the service user that they are subject to abuse, you should inform your coordinator who will contact the relevant services.

This is not breaking the trust of your match. Staff will disclose the terms of confidentiality to anyone who is referred to the project, before your match. The service user will be aware of your role and the duty of care you hold.

Top Tips for Wellbeing



- **Monitor your own wellbeing**

- Register your mood
- Journal your feelings
- Be aware of energy levels

- **Monitor the impact of befriending**

- Register how you feel before meeting
- Register how you feel post-meeting
- Take note of what you are getting out of befriending
- Speak to staff about anything you are finding difficult or draining

- **Know which topics you find difficult**

- It is okay to have topics you aren't comfortable discussing, be aware of these and be transparent with your match if you struggle with any set topic

- **Have space to breathe**

- Ensure you have free time before a befriending match meeting to be in a good space of mind to focus
- Ensure you have free time after a befriending match meeting to allow yourself to process the discussion and move forward

- **Be aware of staff and organisation resources**

- Be conscious of the availability of 1:1 meetings with staff and ensure to discuss you, and not just your match
- Be honest with staff about the impact of the role and how you are handling it
- Take advantage of wellbeing support and resources available, or make suggestions for improvements if warranted



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In conclusion

It is important to monitor and evaluate your well-being and be honest with both yourself and your coordinator about your feelings. Your role as a befriender should be pleasant and enjoyable. The service user may already have feelings of social isolation or loneliness. Having a befriender should provide social interaction and help to eliminate some of the barriers they are facing. If you are befriending with your mind elsewhere and distracted, it will not support their progress but hinder it.

Use your 1:1 support and supervision meetings with staff to discuss your roles and responsibilities as a volunteer and if you need urgent support, make sure to contact or visit the organisation as soon as possible.

Though we may be supporting vulnerable groups through befriending, it does not mean that a befriender's wellbeing is less important. You have just as much right to feel safe and protected. Advocate for yourself and your wellbeing as wanted and when needed.





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