

Adding value

to Cardiff University staff counselling service

In the current conditions managers seek evidence that in-house counselling ‘adds value’. **Tina Abbott** describes how one service addresses this, and puts the case for an internal staff counselling service



Adding value is a key concept in business, and means the increase in value that a business creates by undertaking the production

process¹. Employee support is now seen as essential and sound business sense, vital for enhancing wellbeing and resilience in the workforce. In its 2009 report, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) argued the business case for promoting mental wellbeing at work, stating: ‘Positive steps to improve the management of mental health in the workplace, including prevention and early identification of problems, could result in cost savings of 30 per cent. In an organisation with 1,000 employees, this is equivalent to cost savings of £250,607 per year’². It is especially important at a time of economic stress, a known risk factor for workplace stress which results in increased sickness absence³.

Wainwright and Calnan⁴ suggest workplace stress is a ‘modern epidemic’ which affects health, absence from work and the national economy. MacLeod⁵ carried out a systematic review of all workplace counselling studies from 1980-2005; he found that workplace clients are generally satisfied with their experience. The evidence as a whole is compelling; workplace counselling is effective in alleviating

symptoms of anxiety, stress and depression in the majority of workplace clients. It also reduced sickness absence by up to 60 per cent and had a moderate effect on job commitment, work functioning, job satisfaction and substance misuse. This is convincing evidence that staff counselling helps the workplace. Staff counselling at Cardiff University underpins the university’s commitment to its most valuable asset – its staff – and contributes to the Positive Working Environment (PWE) initiative.

Cardiff University employs 7,000 full-time equivalent staff, and has over 27,000 students. It is a Russell Group University ‘committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector’⁶.

Requests for counselling from staff to the student counselling service led to a 2004 pilot project. The pilot was very well received so the university asked a senior manager to explore the feasibility of an internal or external counselling service. Her report recommended an internal service to the Vice Chancellor. This was implemented in 2007 when I was appointed as the full-time counsellor, along with one full-time administrator. Within the first year the service had a long waiting list and it was necessary to apply for further funding. The service now runs with 1.8fte counsellors and has grown into a proactive preventative service and resource for the university as well as a reactive counselling service.

Activity

The service continues to receive more referrals year on year. In 2007/8 there were 164 referrals for the year. In the first 10 months of 2011 there have already been 175 referrals; and 370 staff have attended our seminars over the last three years.

The current service

The staff counselling service has developed significantly since its introduction. In 2006, following consultation with members of staff, the senior manager listed the required features of a staff counselling service: figure 1 shows the current features and her recommended required features.

The service meets all required features outlined by the senior manager and has developed beyond her recommendations. The service has developed a wide range of training and development seminar programmes in order to be proactive in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of Cardiff University staff. These include: a six-week stress management programme; a self-esteem workshop; an insomnia workshop; problem eating and drinking workshops; relaxation sessions; a living with uncertainty workshop; perfectionism; bereavement workshop; access to psychiatric consultancy for case supervision and referral.

Further developments

The service has launched ‘Beating the Blues’, an interactive, therapeutic, computer-based programme for use anywhere with access to a computer

Required features	Current features
Confidential and discreet	Highly regarded as a professional, discreet service, helped by being located with a discreet door entry system. BACP service accreditation confirms professional systems are in place
Deal with work-related stress issues	Figure 1 is a summary of work-related issues brought to staff counselling, and evidence of successful support, resulting in lowering of distress
Suitable location separate from student counselling	Separate premises
Discretion about appointment and flexibility of times and locations	Lunchtime appointments are especially popular. Staff are seen at two campuses.
Range of appointment times including inside and outside of working hours	As above. If a member of staff has particular issues with timings, early appointments are offered or alternatively we pay for an external counsellor who offers evening appointments
Counselling approaches to reflect the very wide range of staff within the university with different ages, cultures and roles	The service uses five counsellors*, so offers a wide range of approaches and ages, as well as access to our BME counsellor
Administrative support	The service is covered full time; student counselling admin support is shared, and vice versa, to cover absence
Web service provision	There is a comprehensive website including signposting for staff. Also the 'Relief Series' and Beating the Blues (see below)
Ongoing review of service provision	Client feedback is gathered monthly and reviewed, as well as monitoring of CORE outcomes (see below)
Counsellor focused solely on staff issues	Staff Counselling Manager focuses solely on staff counselling and committee work including the Equality and Diversity committee, the Stress Management Co-ordination Group, Positive Working Environment Working Group, Investors in People Working Group
Linked to Dignity at Work officers	Dignity at Work referrals are made via the staff counselling office and Keith Lynch provides admin support for the project. Tina Abbott supports with recruitment, training and support
Separate email and telephone services	Yes
Involved in a range of university projects and policies	PWE initiative, Stress Management Working Group, Equality and Diversity Committee, Dignity at Work, consultation on any relevant policies
Existing provision within the university of self-help material, referred to as 'prescription books', to be incorporated into any staff counselling service	There is a comprehensive library with 150 books, a self-help CBT computerised therapy package (Beating the Blues) and the Relief Series

Figure 1. Current and recommended features of a staff counselling service

*Rather than appoint a full-time and a 0.8fte member of staff, John Cowley (head of counselling) decided to appoint a full-time manager and a further counsellor and allow the student counsellors to work one day per week in staff counselling. This means annual leave and sickness does not have such a severe impact on the service, and allows counsellors further continuing personal development (CPD) opportunities to expand their experience and variety of work.

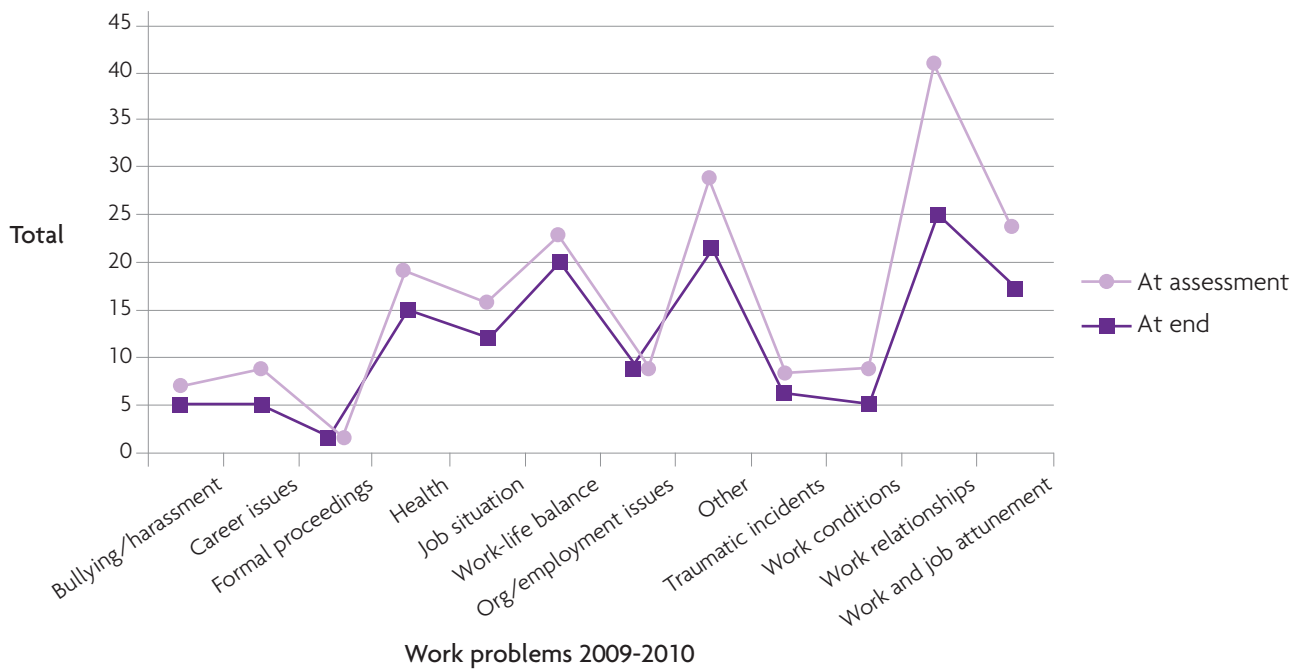


Figure 2. Levels of distress at assessment and end of therapy

and internet connection. It is CBT based and consists of eight sessions. The programme teaches users how to make changes in their lives, stressing the importance of putting into practice what is learnt in each session.

The Relief Series is a new online interactive multimedia programme offering self-help tools to identify, motivate and educate around common mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, insomnia and stress.

Individual consultations for managers dealing with staffing issues are regularly offered along with telephone support, where needed.

Telephone counselling has also been offered when staff have been unable to attend sessions. Skype sessions will also be available in the new academic year.

Figure 2 is a summary of work-related issues brought to staff counselling and evidence of successful support resulting in lowering of distress.

Evaluation of the service

The staff counselling service uses a standard evaluation system, Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation (CORE), which has been developed to help providers of counselling and other psychological therapies to deliver and

evaluate their services. These are measured against national 'benchmarks' for services seeing similar clients across measures such as outcomes, waiting times, client severity, therapy endings etc. As part of the system, all staff are asked to complete a brief questionnaire before and after their contact with the service.

In September 2010 an independent data review was carried out by CORE IMS – the suppliers of the CORE system – comparing Cardiff University's staff counselling service data for the

last three years, with national benchmarks. Figure 3 is a brief summary of the findings for 2009/10.

There is evidence of a generally high standard of data completion and data quality, which has improved year on year during the collection period. This contributes to a high level of data robustness and integrity.

A monthly feedback questionnaire has also been sent out from the inception of the service, and there has been considerable and consistent positive feedback.

	Efficiency	Waiting times to assessment	Outcomes clinical/reliable change
Benchmark workplace services	85% session attendance rate (workplace) 81% primary care	17 days	83% of clients improved (workplace) 71% primary care
Cardiff staff counselling	86% session attendance rate	10 days	73% These outcomes are excellent given that we have a higher number of clients completing counselling who are in a non-clinical range, therefore have less room on the scales for improvement

Figure 3. Service review summary of findings for 2009/10

Figure 4 shows how respondents describe their experience of the staff counselling service. Figure 5 asks whether respondents would recommend the service to colleagues.

Internal or external counselling services?

An ongoing question for institutions, including Cardiff University, has been whether to employ an internal counselling provision or an external Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). Advantages and disadvantages were discussed by Nelson⁷ in 2006.

Carroll and Walton⁸ found some differences in the results for internal and external services. The data indicated that internal counselling services have the greatest effect, in terms of mental and physical health. It is suggested this is because internal counsellors knew the workplace context, the culture, policies and procedures.

An argument frequently put forward for an external service is the provision of counselling for family members of staff. Cardiff University counselling service has offered consultations to family members of staff in very specific circumstances, for example the death of a member of staff. To help in this area, the new online 'Relief Series' is open to any member of staff's family, 24 hours a day.

A further attraction is the 24-hour helpline offered by most EAPs. We argue that this could be an enhanced provision for the internal current provision. However, this is a costly expansion – £14,000 to £24,000 – and perhaps more suited to a workforce without easy access to the internet or Citizens Advice (CAB). Further, GPs and Samaritans currently provide similar services. Also, since our service began there have been no requests from staff members for this provision. Consumer demand for this is debatable.

Cardiff's senior manager investigated staff counselling provision in other Russell Group universities: figure 6 shows the results and the picture five years later. Interestingly, two universities have changed from an external to internal service because of low take-up rates and high costs.

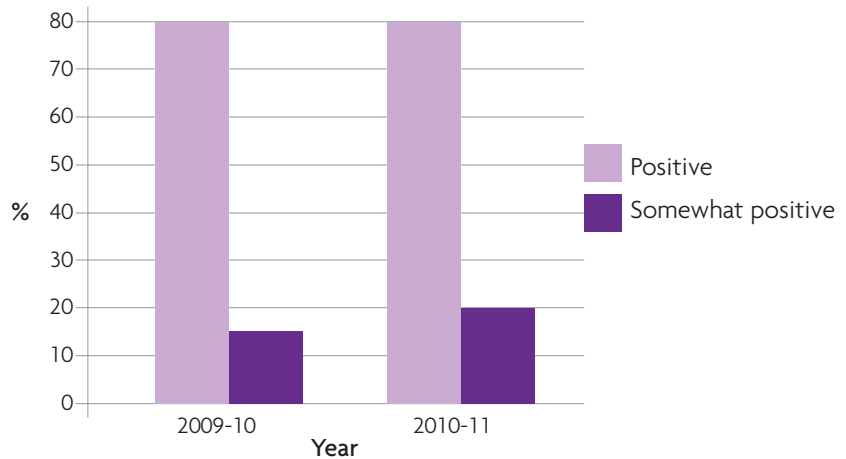


Figure 4. Client feedback to the question: 'How would you describe your experience with the staff counselling service?'

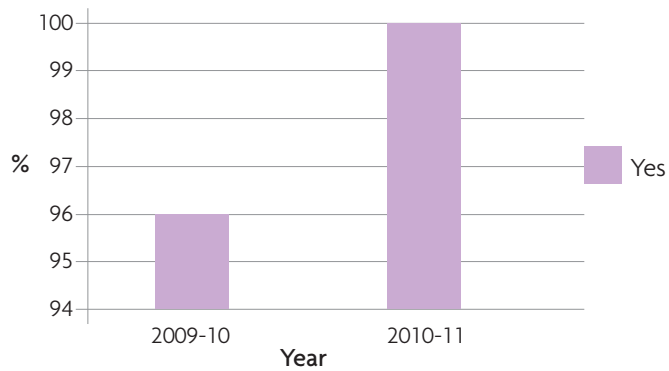


Figure 5. Client feedback to the question: 'Would you recommend the staff counselling service to other members of staff?'

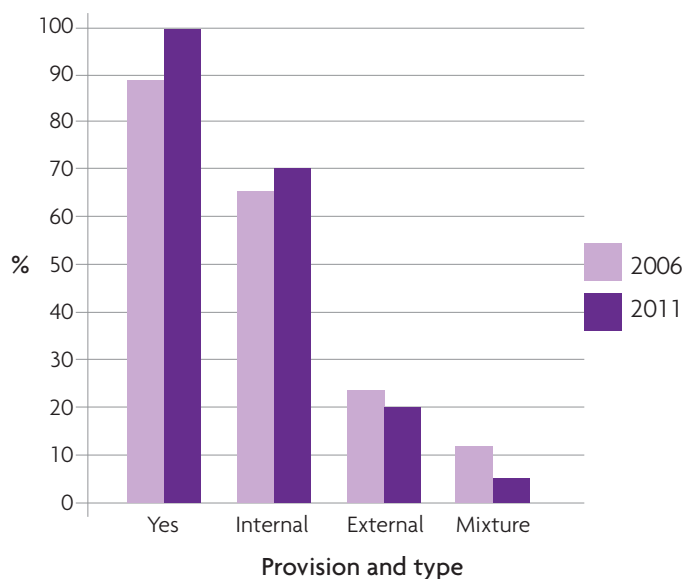


Figure 6. Russell Group universities with staff counselling provision (and type)

The majority of staff consulted with expressed a preference for an internal service. Reasons included:

- they would be 'in-tune with' and understand the university environment
- we already have counselling expertise, which we should make good use of
- can add to the institution and help to develop it
- would form part of the university structure and would be able to pick up on underlying trends and assist with policy development and implementation
- the university would be better able to control the quality of an internal service
- an EAP could be detached and possibly lack understanding of specific university issues
- EAPs are not believed to be sector specific; external services work outside the university's policies and procedures
- EAPs provide a minimum cost bid and charge separately for additional work outside the bid
- EAPs are business operations, at the end of the day, seeking to make a profit.

The future

As can be seen from the evaluations, both from the independent review and feedback from staff, the staff counselling service is effective, and highly regarded and valued by staff. Waiting times are short and counselling session outcomes demonstrate significant improvement.

Future developments include the use of Skype for counselling, supervision and meetings.

Conclusion

Laid out in this article are the arguments for an internal staff counselling service which 'adds value' at Cardiff University. Adding value means providing evidence of good results, benefits, uniqueness and distinctiveness. Obviously this service is very well resourced; however, I hope services not so well situated may find some examples and ideas of ways in which they can demonstrate their own value and added value.

Although Cardiff University uses the CORE programme to measure outcomes, there are other ways of proving outcomes which can be meaningful and cost effective. In the June 2011⁹ edition of *Therapy Today* there was a piece of

research carried out by First Assist of the Capita Counselling Group. They collected answers to a series of questions pre and post counselling. We have adapted those questions for our use:

1. *Please rate your ability to cope with the demands of your job.*
2. *Are your concerns causing you to take sick days?*
3. *Rate your satisfaction with your personal life.*
4. *Rate your relationships with colleagues.*

The answers are set out on a scale, apart from question two. This has enabled First Assist to draw out some very useful stats for reporting purposes such as:

Seventeen per cent of those questioned felt their ability to cope with the demands of their job was 'good' or 'very good' before they had counselling, as opposed to 64 per cent afterwards.

The current AUCC research questions, which the executive committee is collecting for staff counselling from September to December 2011, could be used internally to provide useful data for services to use in their reports:

Using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = not at all, 2 = to a limited extent, 3 = one of many factors, 4 = an important factor, 5 = the most significant factor:

1. *To what extent would you say that counselling has helped you to stay in work?*
2. *To what extent would you say that counselling has helped you do better in your workplace?*
3. *To what extent would you say that counselling has improved your overall experience in the workplace?*
4. *To what extent would you say counselling has helped you develop skills that might be useful in the workplace (eg self-understanding, understanding of others, managing difficult feelings better)?*

Plus two qualitative questions:

1. *Please describe in more detail the ways in which counselling helped you.*

2. *Please also tell us any ways in which you found counselling or any aspects of the service unhelpful.*

It is essential in the current economic climate that counselling services are proactive in circulating their positive data. We need to keep ourselves visible and resist any urge to remain only in the consulting room with clients. We do add value to our communities and we need to continue being creative and identifying ways to showcase our work. ■

Tina Abbott is a BACP senior accredited counsellor and supervisor. She has been involved in workplace counselling for over 10 years and, having initially established the staff counselling service at Cardiff University, has managed it for the last four and a half years. abbottta@cardiff.ac.uk

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Reader response

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