



Be at the forefront with Virtual Volunteering

Advice Service Case Study: Chlöe Morton at Coventry University

Background:

The online volunteering that I do is on a website known as recoveryourlife.com. (RYL) It is predominantly a self-harm support website. However, self-harming/self injuring [intentionally causing harm to oneself for a reason] has never been diagnosed as a specific disorder but is known as a coping mechanism.

Therefore the site accommodates for most of the reasons *why* people would self-harm. These include, substance abuse, eating disorders, people experiencing abuse or bullying, mental disorders and much more. There is also a place where people who are "moving forward", looking away from self-harm, can still find the support and advice they need.

I have been a "supporter" on the website for two years. The role of supporter is to listen, empathise and to signpost. We are not professional counsellors or advisors and ensure that the users know this.

Why did you choose to get involved with this project?

I heard about this opportunity through a friend, empathised with some of the people posting for help and started to sporadically respond to them. I was then asked to be one of the first official supporters on the website.

How important has the Internet, email etc been to the development of your project? What other new media resources did you use?

The Internet has been essential to the project. The website uses a tool called "livehelp", similar to msn messenger, available to the 15 supporters based around the world including Australia, America and England. It is a program commonly used by sales assistants to help customers navigate an on-line shopping website. However RYL utilises "live help" as a place where people can discuss their any concerns or issues in real time.

There is also a chat room, which also acts as a real time instant messenger service for multiple members to discuss problems as well as general chat for distraction and talking to people of a like mind.

RYL also consists of around 11 support forums on topics such as eating disorders, self injury, substance abuse with a further 11 forums to for general topics and making friends.

What types of people volunteer for recoveryourlife?

Most supporters have encountered difficult life experiences themselves and use these personal experiences to further their support. Supporters are not substitutes for professional help and are there to listen more than to give advice.

What support do you get as a volunteer?

As supporters we have access to private forums where we can keep a up to date information of consenting members. This helps keep each other up to date with their progress and decisions to access professional support. This is kept entirely confidential. The Supporters are also a very tight knit group who are always there for one another and understand the Supporters well being is key – it's very difficult to look after other people without looking after yourself. Working with us on the website are Moderators who maintain the guidelines members follow on the website and medically trained first aid advisors and support each other.



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Did student volunteers who don't have access to the tools required at home have difficulty participating in the project? How did you overcome this?

The website can be accessed by public computers. The tools used by the supporters [the email account and live help] are password protected so that volunteers who don't have access at home can volunteer from any computer which has internet access.

Please tell us about a time when your volunteering made you smile.

As supporters we have our own email account and it's really nice when we receive thank you messages from people who we have helped, as well as receiving private messages from individual members for – it really makes it worthwhile!

Do you think volunteering has helped you to develop any skills that will be useful to your career or to other aspects of your life?

I am currently doing a Psychology degree and plan to train as a Clinical Psychologist and this experience has really opened my eyes. I feel that I have heard/read most things in life and I have developed a confidence to talk about all topics, especially those that are currently seen as taboo subjects – such as self harm.

How has your volunteering project helped others?

The website has been know to keep people from harming themselves or ending their own lives. It is there for people to talk their way through difficult times, receive support or by posing creative material [such as poems, stories] to express themselves.

If you would like to find out how you can volunteer virtually contact: Clare@studentvolunteering.org.uk