

# accord extra

Association of Christian Counsellors and Pastoral Care UK

## Bringing Hope to the Hopeless

By Gillian Nichols

When I qualified as a counsellor nine years ago, I had no idea that there was a group of people all struggling with their mental health who were not adequately supported. Often, they had come to the end of recognised established therapies and there was no more help available or they had given up trying to find any as they had lost faith in the system. I am not willing to accept that anyone is a 'hopeless' case, so I began to get to know and understand them and their struggles and my passion was ignited to start using the counselling skills and theories I had studied at college. There are three major ingredients that have proved invaluable. Firstly, having additional supervision. Both my supervisor and I needed to learn how to help and manage this client group. Secondly, the clients recognising my concern for their wellbeing, that this is more than a job for me. Thirdly, my faith, and the Holy Spirit living within me, guiding me and supplying the wisdom and energy needed to sustain the challenges, disappointments and emotional impact.

Six years ago, when the local Foodbank opened, I volunteered in a centre giving out the food to people who had reached the point of not having enough money to feed themselves and their families. It was while working among this client group I realised how many



were struggling with mental health difficulties. Some clients had attended NHS groups or counselling sessions, but the local NHS services are under strain and there simply aren't enough resources to help everyone and only providing short term work. Even after attending NHS services many still experienced depression and anxiety. They needed long-term one to one therapy. I also began volunteering as a counsellor at a local drop-in centre called The Meeting Room for people who are homeless, socially isolated and unemployed. Other organisations such as the local hostel, called Leatherhead Start and the Epsom and Ewell refugee network heard about the work I was doing and invited me to work with people in their care who needed counselling.

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So, I found myself working as a self-employed counsellor in the charity sector and very aware that I also had bills to pay and a living to make. There is no funding available from the NHS, Local or Central Government for any of the work I am doing. I discovered that funding for these Charities is generated from private donors, local companies and in our area The Community Foundation for Surrey. The charities I work for applied for funding specifically for counselling. I decided to charge a 'charity rate' for my services enabling the funding to stretch to cover more sessions. At times this funding runs low and we have to approach supporters of the charities in the hope of gaining more donations.

This type of work can of course be frustrating as this client group often have chaotic lifestyles and will at times forget when they are due to meet with me. Often, they disappear for a while and then reappear, desperate to return to counselling. However, it is often the most incredibly rewarding work, as seen in a client's letter below (printed with permission). I am reaching a sector of the community that desperately needs support, and care, bringing hope to many who have given up on themselves. This work is challenging with such a variety of presenting problems and symptoms. The clients present a variety of diagnoses ranging from Emotionally Unstable Personality Disorder, Heroin or alcohol addictions, depression, anxiety, PTSD, self-harm, suicidal, OCD, Schizophrenia. The majority have been suffering since childhood and have multiple diagnoses. Although this may appear overwhelming, as it was for me when I started working with this client group, I discovered they are just people who need help. We are working with people, not their label. All present difficulties of low self-esteem and little or no personal agency, and consequently use destructive coping mechanisms like alcohol and drugs to try and manage their emotions, which often results in addictive behavioural patterns.

The difficulties with this type of work are manifold. All these types of clients require long term weekly appointments. Charities and financial supporters do not have unlimited funds and most donations come with restrictions, like limiting the number of sessions. It is an emotional struggle for someone like me to be told that I cannot see a specific client anymore because their allocation is finished, especially when you know you are in a critical stage of the work and they require ongoing support and care. I am currently working with the support of some members of my church to gain additional funds for longer term clients. Neither are there enough counsellors. In the end it often feels like we are letting our clients down but at the same time we see amazing results. This is where the reward lies,

'bringing hope to the hopeless'.

My model is a non-judgemental, person centred approach that helps create a space for the clients to bring into the sessions anything they choose. I also use psychoeducation and a practical explanation of counselling models, like Transactional Analysis, which can help them understand their thoughts and feelings. [One of my clients has expressed the need for this type of counselling service. We have been working together for 18 months and initially his defences were high; he did not trust anyone. During our time together he has gradually begun to disclose information that he had never shared with anyone. He has been able to acknowledge the progress he is making; his aggressive behaviour has significantly reduced. He has developed the ability to cope more effectively with stressful situations. He is integrating into the community, taking on voluntary work rather than isolating himself. See his letter included below.](#)

It is my hope this article encourages you if you are interested in volunteering in this area of the 'difficult to reach' client group. My suggestion is to approach your local Foodbanks or charities to discover if you can partner with them to raise funding and begin working with those who have reached a point in their lives where they feel that society has given up on them.

To whom it may concern,

My name is Ian, and I'm an ex soldier of 15 years. For my time in the armed forces I was given a bust back, knees and hip. My head has been cracked open 3 times, and I have a head full of squirrels (known as PTSD).

When I left the army, my wife left me, in fact it was the very same day as my discharge, my family had already abandoned me, because a soldier is not what they wanted! and I came back to a country that didn't want me either. I emigrated to New Zealand, lived there for a year, then due to their recession, I had to come back. Penniless and now homeless I went to the streets. Luckily for me a charity found me, helped me, got me into a flat, and then sent me off for six weeks in a military mental health hospital (combat stress) as it was pointed out to me that as well as my physical injuries I was suffering with PTSD.

That was it for me, a quick six weeks, you're all better off you go. I got off the drink, and had time to think ... lots of time to think, years of it. I have asked for help along the way, but alas the country I broke my body and mind to defend, just doesn't give a damn.

Christmas Eve 2017 I found myself in a little local church, still to this day, don't know why I went where I did, or why I went, but then that's part of PTSD, I have very poor memory. I was introduced to a lady called Gill. Someone who has been seeing me on a weekly basis for some time now, the first person to give a damn. I could spend a further 10 pages, writing about how if I hadn't found the church, I'd still be sat here crying every day, hitting myself, others, walls. How utterly let down I feel, and alone, but I'll just say. I have no family, and no country to feel safe and supported in. I hate this country and everything it stands for! For a soldier who spent 15 years swearing to defend this country, this is a horrid feeling. But again, I'm sure these things are not understood by the majority, I have not seen honour, or patriotism outside the army.

The long and short of this letter is to ask that you recognise your failings as a government, a country, a modern democracy, and a people, and understand that for many of us, the 'Gill's' of the world are all we have. I understand and accept that no one cares or wants to help, so please give the money, for the funding, for this amazing person, who does want to help, so that I have someone, to help me make sense of this cruel world. And who knows maybe she'll help me get to a point where I can help people, pass on the good work. Not in a paid capacity, but just in a daily capacity.

Gill has never been in the forces. Gill knows nothing about army life, in fact we haven't even really spoke about that side of things yet. But Gill did something that was amazing to me, considering how I'm treated on a daily basis! She went out of her way to learn about military PTSD! No one goes even in my direction! Let alone out of their way, to help me! So, you see by taking the church away from me, from taking Gill away from me, I'll be back to having nothing. I know people don't really care about that, but think of the funds you could save, if you help people like me! I'm one of many! Crime happens, anger happens, violence happens, life ends! This is the shape of the country today. Because no one cares ... well I have someone who cares, and I'm asking you to care long enough, to simply sign a piece of paper saying you give access to some funds. Thx

#### **About the author**

Gillian is a mother of two children and has four grandchildren that keep her busy when she is not working. After studying at Spurgeon's college she set up at private practice working from home. She recognised the need for good quality counselling for those who were unable to afford private therapy and has tailored her practice according to the individual requirements of each client. This involves some sessions taking place in clients' homes and working from several locations where the charities are located. She is a registered, accredited member of the ACC and can be contacted by email: