

Amplified Trailblazer: Oxford Health (Bath and North East Somerset): Boys in Mind Project



About this project:

The film, “A letter to my younger self” and associated resources are part of a wider BaNES (Bath and North East Somerset) Boys in Mind strategy which aims to:

- Raise awareness of the effects of gender conditioning and stereotyping on the behaviour of boys and young men
- Seek ways to reduce stigma around mental illness and poor well-being amongst boys and young men
- Review existing PSHE resources and school mental health programmes to take account of what it means to be a boy for example through reviewing language and advice given
- Explore ways of encouraging help-seeking behaviour amongst boys and young men
- Identify links with alcohol and risk-taking behaviours as coping strategies for boys and young men.

Rationale

Suicide is the leading cause of death among men and women aged between 20 and 34 years of age in England and Wales with males having considerably higher rates than females (13.8 per 100,000 for males in 2011-13, compared to 4.0 for females). Public Health England identify young men as being at particular risk alongside people who are lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ).

This project sits within the focus area of integrating suicide prevention work within the broader framework of promoting mental health and wellbeing. It builds on existing understanding about the key risk factors for adult male suicide identified by the 2014 Samaritan's Report '[Men, Suicide and Society](#)' and seeks to identify ways in which early intervention with boys can mitigate against these.

Risk factors include:

- Emotional illiteracy – men are much less likely than women to have a positive view of counselling or therapy, and when they do use these services, it is at the point of crisis
- Men are less likely to talk with friends and family about their feeling and worries
- Men are more likely than women to respond to stress by taking risks, like misusing alcohol and drugs
- Relationship breakdown is more likely to lead men, rather than women, to suicide
- Socio-economic factors – unemployed people are 2-3 times more likely to die by suicide than those in work and suicide increases during economic recession.

Early consultation with boys and young men informed our strategy and identified key priorities:

1. Attitudes towards masculinity

Beliefs about what it means to be male underpin gender differences in attitudes towards mental health, and in behavioural responses to mental health issues, including help seeking behaviours. Boys said they feel they have to be strong, to cope and not accept or ask for support from others including those close to them. They keep how they are feeling hidden. Some admitted trying to be more open but said it is still difficult. They told us,

“We're taught not to really talk about how we feel”

“If you show emotion you're seen as weak/looked down on”

“A lot of boys/men think they can deal with it themselves”

“Don't know when to ask for help”

The young people at SPACE LGBT+ youth group said that it is a struggle for men to admit they are having problems or issues and this is mainly due to “toxic masculinity” i.e. not being allowed to be open and express themselves without being judged by the stereotypical view of what is socially acceptable.

2. Targeted education

They told us our focus should be:

“Teach that it's all right for boys to show their emotions”

“More education on where to get help/when you should seek help/what the warning signs are”

“We need to educate society about stereotypes and expectations.”

3. Provision of appropriate support

“Have a male school nurse/figure you can talk to”

Boys said that one of the problems was that they preferred to go to one person, preferably another male who they looked up to. In schools the majority of the teachers are female and in most cases the staff who specifically deal with mental health and student wellbeing are women too.

Boys said they need very private, safe places in which to access support and need people they can trust who have skills to offer support and help.

They said the ways they're expected to ask for help aren't comfortable for them. They don't want it to be:

"over-emotional or public"

"The familiar model of seeing a counsellor in school and having to leave lessons would be hell! Everyone would know and ask, and it would be extremely awkward."

"If boys are struggling to come to others, maybe the others could try to come to them. I know in my experiences, it took me years to talk to anyone, despite the fact I know people had picked up on it. It's far easier to talk as the 'approached' instead of the 'approacher'."

The SPACE LGBT+ group said that counselling and support is not targeted at boys and men and especially gay, bisexual and trans boys and men - it is hard to find. And counselling (at school and college) is usually too visible and everyone can see that you are accessing it. Boys and men don't want this stigma as well as the stigma around their sexuality - it's too much to deal with.

4. Training for school staff which addresses inequalities and includes information about the ways boys express mental health issues

"Teachers should be made more aware of students' wellbeing"

Boys said they are treated differently to their female peers by teaching staff. More allowances are made for girls. Female staff are often particularly bad in this respect and male PE staff often can empathise more with boys. They are often younger and have a shared experience that helps them. Schools can feel a hostile environment and they said it's not surprising boys are reluctant to show or admit any weakness.

"Boys are generally viewed as not as sensitive as girls"

Boys said they display their difficulties in less obvious ways e.g.

"If you notice a boy is quiet, not caring about things in the usual way, not taking part or hunched up and separating themselves from what's going on, always very defensive - all those things may be a sign. They might not make a scene or act up."

"It may be the case that people don't know what to do if they think someone is struggling, maybe they need teaching, or maybe people need to be taught especially to look out for signs of people struggling."

One young person with ASD spoke a lot about bad behaviour being interpreted as a boy just deliberately being disruptive, instead of anyone considering underlying issues. And he said that then damaged relationships with teachers so then there was even less people that he'd be able to speak to if he was ready to. This young man also found that if he showed any weakness, which was often the way he'd react if someone said anything about his family or if he was just having a really down day, a lot of teachers would use it against him instead of supporting him.

5. Issues associated with bullying for boys

Bullying can be a factor and girls bullying boys in particular is not tackled effectively. It's difficult for a boy to challenge it as it feeds the image of being weak. In a similar way males are often less able to admit they are being abused. SPACE said that domestic violence and abuse is not taken seriously and that men may be too embarrassed to admit this is happening to them because it damages their macho image.

“As an interviewee I was motivated by a desire to change the culture that leads to boys getting misinformation about what behaviours are needed to be a successful man.” Jim

What were key barriers to it being successful?

It was easier to engage boys and young men in a film project than it has been with other forms of participation that are less activity based. However, it was still challenging to find young men prepared to be open about their mental health challenges. Our starting point as a group was exploring what the film would be like and then as relationships and trust developed they were more willing to be open about their own experience.

“The amount of information and film out there.... ours is one small voice” Jim

What expertise or skills did you have in your team/organisation, what did you need to bring in from outside? Whose buy-in was important and how was it demonstrated?

The film is part of a broader strategy, supported by a core group of representatives from CAMHS, Public Health, Education and young people as well as a wider reference group of representatives from secondary, primary and special schools, local youth organisations and a parent/carer forum. All of us are passionate about this issue and happy to give our time and energy to the work. We also have different skills and experience to contribute.

From my perspective as CAMHS Participation lead the support of my trust and in particular local managers to allocate time to this work and facilitate the involvement of our young people and clinicians has also been invaluable. I know I can cover transport costs for the young people and refreshments and venue costs when necessary.

We were fortunate in having assistance from professional film makers. We had made a number of films previously with the company and with financial support from Into Film and this collaboration had proved to be very successful. Into Film, Suited and Booted and ourselves all work in a very participative way with young people, enabling them to take a lead in all aspects of the film making process. On completion of ‘It’s time to be your own hero’, a series of three films encouraging young people to ask for help we told the film company we would very much like to make a film focussing specifically on male mental health and suicide. Shortly afterwards we were approached when some new funding became available.

What did you learn along the journey about co-production and participation?

Many of those who have the most to contribute need space, time and support to share their views and experience. They need to trust those involved and know their views will be valued and respected.

Some of the young men who shared their experience were very reluctant to do so publicly and I met with them individually so they could retain their anonymity.

In some cases, clinicians initiated these links. I also asked female members of the Participation team to help and they spoke with young men they knew well.

We also learned the value of providing opportunities for the young men to meet together as a group but also providing additional opportunities for the female members of the group to join them contribute to the conversation from their perspective.

What are your Top Tips to other organisations wanting to develop a participation project with a group like this?

1. Ensure young people are involved from the outset in agreeing the aims of the project

2. Providing a creative focus around something like a film allows relationships and trust to develop early on before young people need to consider sharing more personal aspects of their own experience. It also gives them the option to contribute in a less personal way if they wish.
3. It proved easier to attract young men to activity based and creative forms of participation

“As an interviewee I was treated well, adequately informed and thanked. Overall it was a good experience... so I would say the organising group did that bit very well. I also feel proud to be part of final cut.” Jim

What impact have you had? What impact do you hope to have?

The film has been well received and once the accompanying resources and activities are complete will be a useful resource to use with young people and professionals.

We have previously developed ‘Positive Mental Health’ resource packs for secondary and primary schools and these activities will be an invaluable addition.

What comes next for your project?

We are preparing for a conference in April which will be a great opportunity to disseminate learning from our work thus far.

We are also exploring how best to continue the work that has started and are exploring what funding might be needed and what potential sources there are.

From the bereaved mum who took part:

“This is absolutely wonderful!! I’m so impressed with what you have achieved. Obviously heart-breaking to watch but needs to be said.

It is very poignant as we approach the anniversary of Alex’s death but it warms my heart to know that people like you and the team are reaching out to young men about opening up.

This is a piece of work all should be proud of and I hope it contributes to saving a young man’s life.”