



A volunteer mentor programme is helping British wounded, injured and sick soldiers find their feet back in 'civvie' street. **Sally-Anne Airey**, a volunteer mentor herself, describes how leavers are being supported.



THE PEACE PROCESS

When Corporal David Henderson was medically discharged from the British Army in September 2012, at the age of 26, he became one of 1,500 young Service men and women whose careers are unexpectedly cut short every year through injury or poor health. David was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in February 2012, following his experiences in Afghanistan three years before.

For the previous eight years, David had been successfully immersed in a way of life whose culture, language and values encourage selfless commitment to the mission and the team. Now one of the 'wounded, injured or sick' – known collectively in the

Services as WIS – he was facing a transition that many find profoundly disorientating.

The Armed Forces needs its people to be fit enough to perform their duties to the standard required of them. WIS personnel are discharged when their physical or psychological condition prevents them from being able to do this. Many have to find a new home, as well as a new job, while also coping with their disability. Their sense of loss can be deep and complex and they can feel isolated and vulnerable in a world they struggle to relate to.

In 2011, the Ministry of Defence asked SSAFA – the national charity for Service people, veterans and their families – to design and establish a mentoring service to support WIS Service leavers during their transition to civilian life.

With dedicated funding from the Royal Foundation of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry, the Forces in Mind Trust, ABF, the Soldiers' Charity and the Army Central Fund, SSAFA designed an 18 month pilot mentoring programme to complement the work of the Army's own effort to support WIS soldiers, the Army Recovery Capability (ARC).

ARC had been founded in early 2010 to provide a clear, supporting infrastructure and a route map for WIS Service leavers. SSAFA's pilot mentoring programme was launched in October 2011 with the following mission:

"To provide and maintain a first-class, bespoke 'transitional mentoring' programme for wounded, injured and sick service personnel as they prepare for



L to R: Sally-Anne Airey; Fiona Wakefield (mentor) with David Henderson; John Elvin (mentor) with Mark Neale

civilian life and to continue beyond discharge as they settle within their new environment.

This is based on good practice and close collaboration with key stakeholders and partner agencies, and a mutually respectful relationship between Service leaver and mentor, in order to optimise the ARC transition programme, engender enthusiasm and confidence and realise potential within the Service leaver.”

David was introduced to his SSAFA mentor, Fiona Wakefield, while still serving, and they now meet regularly in Newcastle. “When they told me about the SSAFA mentoring scheme I didn’t need persuading. Fiona came down to Catterick to meet me. It really helps to just continue the process of having someone to talk to. It’s important to have someone to

speak to outside of the family who will keep me on track,” he says.

Fiona is a mental health nurse working in service improvement for Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Trust. She says: “Both my parents were in the RAF. I was an Army cadet and then an Army Cadet Force instructor for 14 years, so volunteering for SSAFA seemed

an obvious step for me... Mainly [David and I] talk about what he’s going to do now that he’s out of the Army...building rapport. I’m not really offering advice or opinions, just listening or asking appropriate questions. I feel privileged to be able to help someone with their transition to civilian life.”

Service leavers’ views

- “At some point I didn’t want to do anything and she [the mentor] just encouraged me – she probably doesn’t even realise it”
- “Helping me to stay positive even when it looks impossible”
- “A good sounding board and a good friend who listens without prejudice”
- “Mentoring helped me to get the confidence to speak to people again”
- “The mentor has definitely been helping me to make the transition to civilian life. Just by being that extra support when needed”
- “It is extremely helpful and reassuring to know that you are not alone when you leave the Service”

“ A key objective of the pilot service was to create a sustainable transitional mentoring programme that could ultimately be applied across all three Services ”

SSAFA programme

A set of principles was drawn up to outline the fundamental standards and requirements of the pilot mentoring programme, including its scope, health and safety requirements, confidentiality, mentor supervision and independent programme evaluation.

A project manager was appointed. Along with developing the project, his primary objective was to recruit and manage up to 50 volunteer mentors to support a target of 42 mentoring relationships during the 18 month period of the project.

It was envisaged that mentoring relationships would typically start six months before the WIS Service leavers were discharged and continue for at least a year, or until a mentee felt ready to go solo.

Volunteer mentors from a range of backgrounds, skills and experience – including, but not restricted to, ex-Service personnel – were carefully selected through a paper sift, telephone interview and final assessment, following a three-day bespoke residential mentor training course. Training focused

on drawing out the mentor’s ability to challenge and guide the Service leaver towards a positive and resilient perspective, through active listening, supportive questioning, reflection and encouraging self-belief and resourcefulness. Mentors and Service leavers were then matched geographically.

Throughout the programme, all mentors have been offered regular, one-to-one supervision with a supervisor accredited by the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy. Email communication has been via a secure e-mentoring support system, which has also provided an online discussion forum for mentors to share resources, ideas and experiences.

Evaluation

A key objective of the pilot service was to create a sustainable transitional mentoring programme that could ultimately be applied across all three Services. The Charities Evaluation Service (CES) was therefore engaged to conduct an independent external evaluation of the pilot. The CES has sought confidential feedback from

all participants – via online questionnaires, focus groups and one-to-one conversations – on the outcomes experienced by Service leavers, the support and guidance mentors and mentees have experienced and recommendations for future improvements.

Next Steps

As the pilot programme concludes, steps are being taken to expand transitional mentoring to a wider client base during 2013 and to include all those who will be medically discharged from the Army. From 2014 it is hoped to extend the mentoring programme to the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. Approved Provider Standard programme accreditation is also being sought from the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation.

If the programme expands as envisaged, the 2013 target will require the number of volunteer mentors to be increased by 400 per cent, to a total of 250. While volunteer mentors are not in short supply – in the first two months of this year more than 70 had been selected for training – the project manager would welcome the support of experienced coaches and mentors. ■

Learning points

- The programme’s inherent challenges mean professional mentor supervision is essential
- A system for supporting the mentoring relationships online is very helpful
- A comprehensive welcome pack for both Service leavers and mentors would help individual preparation
- Peer support/sharing aids the learning process and should be encouraged further
- To mitigate redundancy and skill fade, selected mentors will not be called forward for training until a geographically matched Service leaver has been identified

Could you help?

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