

HELP: A PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVE ON PROGRAMMES FOR DOMESTIC ABUSE PERPETRATORS. A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Dr Rebecca Woolford, Interserve; Dr Julia Wardhaugh, Prifysgol Bangor

Abstract

Domestic abuse perpetrators are a significant proportion of the Probation Services caseload. Domestic abuse often has long-term problems and generational consequences for children, families and communities in terms of the repetition of abusive and violent behaviours. In the criminal justice system there are several innovative approaches to tackling domestic abuse. The newly formed Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) has developed HELP as an early programme with the aim of reducing the long-term consequences of unhealthy relationships. This qualitative study gives an insight into practitioners' perspectives on HELP. Firstly, this study strongly suggests that the approach, delivery and content of HELP are in keeping with the current desistance literature and that the programme is a positive example of innovative, skilled and creative practice. Secondly, for effective practice with perpetrators of domestic abuse there must be a multi-dimensional approach, a professional commitment and dynamic practice in times of tremendous change and uncertainty.

Keywords

Programme; domestic abuse; probation; perceptions; qualitative; practitioners

Introduction

It is widely accepted that domestic abuse is perpetrated in many forms and within many types of relationships (World Health Organization, 2012). Following public acknowledgement of this significant social and personal problem, it became apparent that the behaviour perpetrated by abusive individuals did not take the form of physical violence alone but included psychological, financial and sexually motivated behaviour. The term domestic abuse has become widely used, as it encompasses all behaviours and not solely violence. The new cross-governmental definition of domestic violence and abuse is broad, covering a range of incidents encompassing differing levels of severity and consequence. In this study we use this definition to refer to all the above forms of domestic violence and abuse. However, due to the cohort of people on probation that attend the HELP for domestic abuse programme, we limit the focus to intimate partner abuse against women. The official definition is noted below:

Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. It can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse: psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional (Home Office, 2018:6).

Domestic abuse is generally acknowledged to be a far more pervasive problem than indicated by police reports, and much research has attempted to estimate its true extent and distribution within the general population. Statistics on domestic abuse are produced separately by a number of different organisations in England and Wales. It is difficult to measure the prevalence of domestic abuse; there are many sources of measurement, all of which have substantial weaknesses. However, the wide range of available sources all point in the same direction, indicating that domestic abuse is widespread. With the increase in the identification, conviction and subsequent sentencing of domestic abuse perpetrators in courts came the emergence of perpetrator programmes in a probation setting (Crawford, 2017). However, women often do not report or disclose domestic abuse to the police (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2014) and may under-report domestic abuse in surveys (Office for National Statistics, 2015).

The evaluation process has helped to inform the evolution of domestic abuse programmes in the criminal justice system. However, many debates exist about how effectiveness can be measured. Findings concerning prevalence, causes, consequences and risks of domestic abuse vary significantly (Archer, 2000; Buzawa and Buzawa, 2002; DeKeseredy, 2000; Dobash et al., 1992; Dwyer, 1999; Johnson and Bunge, 2001; Romkens, 1997; Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000). Large-scale general crime surveys do not easily accommodate fine-grained exploration and analysis, but local, in-depth studies are more prone to sampling bias and therefore less representative (Walby and Myhill, 2001). In the past, reconviction rates for individuals who have completed programmes have been utilised; however, there are issues to consider in relation to conviction rates for domestic abuse, and the effectiveness of any programme that aims to positively change behaviour cannot be measured by reconviction rates alone. 'We cannot be sure of the apparent programme effect or separate effect of other components. The success of the programme appears to

be relegated to the programme system as a whole' (Gondolf, 2002:208). The Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP) evaluation attempted to expand on this by considering the perpetrators', victims' and professionals' views when asking if domestic abuse programmes work (Westmarland and Kelly, 2013). This study therefore looks beyond reconviction rates to qualitative perspectives from practitioners in the field of delivering the HELP programme as part of their daily practice.

Domestic abuse programmes in probation

Community rehabilitation companies (CRCs) deliver a range of group-work and individual programmes with the purpose of facilitating change with individuals under supervision. People on probation on accredited programmes are court mandated to engage. Accredited programmes are delivered as a requirement of a Community Order under Section 202 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, or as a licence condition on release from a custodial sentence. Occasionally, a case manager may refer people on probation directly to the programme. People on probation attending non-accredited programmes are referred by their case managers. The features of effective offending behaviour programmes are based on the premises of being meaningful, engaging and accessible for people on probation. These programmes are designed to address aspects of an individual's attitudes and behaviours that are linked to offending behaviours. These factors not only contribute to offending but are often the underlying reasons for difficulties in many other areas of their lives. There have been historical developments in accrediting programmes addressing domestic abuse. In the site CRC, the IDAP programme was replaced by Building Better Relationships (BBR), which was rolled out in 2014. In addition, CRCs have developed alternative programmes to target domestic abuse among non-adjudicated men; these are referred to as non-accredited programmes. In the site CRC, there was no provision for a non-accredited programme to address domestic abuse. Therefore, to fill the gap, HELP was created in 2014.

Numerous programmes have been developed to address criminal behaviour; cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has been one of the most successful and widely studied. The CBT approach has 'an emphasis on broad human change, but with a clear emphasis on demonstrable, behavioural outcomes...' (Dobson and Khatri, 2000:908). People on probation are often referred to many different programmes in the criminal justice system that are based on the principles of CBT. CBT is a family of psychological programmes derived from the principles of traditional psychotherapy and behaviour learning theories (Beck, 1995). Its approach is to explore the relationship '...through changes in the way an individual perceives, reflects upon, and, in general, thinks about their life circumstances' (Dobson and Khatri, 2000:908). CBT programmes for people on probation emphasise personal accountability, and help understand and teach alternative behaviours and thought processes. Given the dominance of CBT, there are some who raise legitimate criticisms of the approach (Gaudiano, 2008). As the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2012) emphasises, CBT relies on the co-operation and motivation of the individual. In addition, previously CBT did not view the therapeutic relationship established between parties as being important to affect change (Giovazolias, 2004). Moreover, CBT fails to address the concerns of the 'whole' individual and does not address the wider problems. The HELP programme is based on the principles of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT). Albert Ellis (1957)

developed REBT, which is the first form of CBT. REBT is a brief, direct and solution-oriented therapy which focuses on resolving specific problems faced by a troubled individual.

The HELP programme

The Offender Assessment System (OASys) was introduced in 2001 (Ministry of Justice, 2009). It provides a standardised assessment of people on probation which is based on risk and needs. People on probation in CRCs in England and Wales are identified as low to medium risk. 'Low risk' assesses that there is not a likelihood of causing serious harm, and 'medium risk' assesses that there are indicators of serious harm but it is unlikely to occur unless there is a change in circumstances. HELP is a unique programme that addresses the needs of the target population: low- to medium-risk people on probation at risk of, or having perpetrated domestic abuse. Fundamental to REBT is the concept that our emotions result solely from our beliefs. The central aim of REBT is to reduce irrational beliefs in favour of rational beliefs (Ellis and Dryden, 1997). Practitioners delivering HELP are trained to reshape and challenge unhealthy core beliefs of people on probation, acting as a catalyst for change to enable them to develop the skills for healthy relationships. A review by Browne et al. (2010) highlights many unhealthy associates of irrational beliefs, such as anger, guilt and shame, and psychopathological conditions including depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. HELP accomplishes change through teaching people on probation how to identify irrational beliefs, challenge them and replace them with rational ones.

HELP is a healthy relationship non-accredited programme that has been designed for people on probation with identified relationship difficulties in the site CRC. It has been developed as a non-accredited programme and is therefore not subject to the official standards of accredited programmes. Key features of HELP include clear guidance on planning and delivering the programme: roles, eligibility, suitability, communication and exit plans. In addition, HELP is based on the current desistance literature to be solution-focused, consider protective factors, and establish a therapeutic alliance through responsivity and group cohesion. As the HELP programme does not follow the structured format of an accredited programme, the delivery of the content is highly dependent on the skills and ability of the practitioners. Therefore, HELP would not be suitable as an entry-level delivery programme for new practitioners. Consequently, the non-accredited programme status of HELP has meant that the flexible format has provided both opportunities and challenges for delivery. The purpose of HELP is to act as a catalyst for change for people on probation to develop and maintain positive and functional intimate relationships. Taking a holistic approach to relationships, HELP predominantly focuses on intimate partners but does consider the wider impact of relationships such as those in the family unit, with children and with authority figures. HELP facilitates the opportunity for people on probation to understand how their attitude to relationships can be beneficial or detrimental in their social networks.

The HELP programme lasts for 15 weeks and is conducted on an individual basis or in a small-group environment managed by trained practitioners. There is a tendency to lean towards group work for people on probation unless there is a need for individual treatment. Group work provides opportunities for practitioners to build a rapport with people on probation through providing positive feedback, providing emotional support, challenging behaviour and learning through various mediums (Marshall, et al., 1999; Salter, 1988;

Sawyer, 2002). Each session is intended to last for approximately 90 minutes with informal breaks and comfort breaks. In most cases, CBT programmes are designed to be delivered in a structured, classroom-based environment, to groups of 8–12 individuals (Dobson and Khatri, 2000). In contrast, HELP incorporates a more fluid discussion-based learning environment. The rationale for moving away from the traditional classroom environment is the well-known association between people on probation and poorer literacy and educational attainment/experience (Adult Learning and Basic Skills Unit, 1994; Palfrey, 1974; Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). Group work is spent engaged in dialogue, listening to practitioner monologues and completing exercises as a group. Cullen and Gendreau (2000) note that this is an attempt to help people on probation to identify the problems or situations that led them into conflict with authorities, to choose goals and to create and implement prosocial solutions to their problems. HELP uses visual tools and conversation prompts that are relatable for the target population. In addition, the application of examples relevant to the target population, as well as the use of a common vernacular, makes this approach unique.

In order to address domestic abuse in intimate relationships there needs to be an understanding of the general dynamics of intimate relationships. Johnson's typology (2008) of intimate partner violence has three dramatically different forms: intimate terrorism, violent resistance and situational couple violence. The IDAP programme included criticism of the impact, style and theoretical basis theory, suggesting that this abuse is almost exclusively an intentional effort to control partners (Dutton and Corvo, 2006). This would fall under Johnson's typology of intimate terrorism, with domestic violence being 'embedded in a general pattern of power and control' (2008:8). The criminal justice system has begun to question and move away from the more traditional views of domestic abuse that have underpinned male perpetrator programmes. For example, abusive behaviours may not simply reflect patriarchal attitudes but in some instances may be associated with personal trauma, poor attachments in childhood, fear of abandonment, low self-esteem and substance misuse (Morran, 2013). As Johnson advocated: 'We have to make distinctions. It makes no sense to treat intimate partner violence as a unitary phenomenon' (Johnson, 2008:72).

The HELP programme and desistance

Put simply, desistance refers to permanently giving up an offending lifestyle (Farrall and Calverley, 2005). Laub and Sampson (2001) acknowledge that there is a vast difference between people stopping committing an offence and people making a continuous change to a crime-free lifestyle. Therefore, desistance from crime is a much discussed yet poorly understood aspect of criminology (Mulvey et al., 2004). As McNeill et al. (2012:3) eloquently put it, 'the long-term abstinence from criminal behaviour ... is something of an enigma'. The pathways that people use to desist are varied and complex, relating to both the external or social aspects of a person's life and internal or psychological factors (LeBel et al., 2008). The path to desistance is not a linear process and is likely to involve lapses and relapses (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). Since desistance is an inherently individualised approach, the criminal justice system must accommodate issues of identity and diversity (McNeill et al., 2012). Therefore, understanding desistance fills a gap in our knowledge

about criminal behaviour, providing useful insight for criminal justice agencies and policy makers.

Aligning with the current desistance literature, HELP recognises the importance of relationships as a catalyst to stop offending in general. Recently, evidence has also been emerging about the importance of self-identity, self-efficacy and agency in the desistance process. It has been suggested that programmes are most likely to be effective where they encourage and respect self-determination (McCulloch, 2005; McNeill, 2006). For example, people can be encouraged to develop new identities such as 'worker' or 'father' rather than being known as simply an 'offender' (Farrall, 2002; McNeill and Whyte, 2007). Practitioners delivering HELP strive to recognise the positive potential of people on probation (McNeill and Maruna, 2007), seeking as advocates to avoid identifying behaviours that individuals want to leave behind. The programme acknowledges the importance of key relationships in an individual's life and then reaffirms the value of support to develop and maintain these. HELP aimed to meet the site CRC's need for a pre-emptive approach towards domestic abuse programmes. Whilst establishing a clear understanding of problematic and harmful behaviour, the focus is on building and/or rebuilding trust, empathy and a healthy relationship in the context of intimate relationships. Supporting and developing these capacities and skills can be useful in criminal justice programmes (Maruna and LeBel, 2003; 2009).

Methodology

This research used qualitative semi-structured interviews, as the main aim was to gain an understanding of practitioners' thoughts on the HELP programme delivered across a CRC in England and Wales. The project would produce and could lead to insight into the future roll out of the HELP programme during 2019. The research will benefit practitioners with regard to how to proceed with innovative programmes and the extent to which their perspectives can affect practice. This research will contribute to the wider knowledge of organisational changes within probation and the effects on staff and programmes. The researcher, Woolford, was internal to the site under investigation and the fieldwork was completed with colleagues of Woolford. The co-author, Wardhaugh, who assisted in coding and interpreting the data, was external to the CRC and had no prior professional relationship with the participants. As co-author, Wardhaugh was independent of the organisation under investigation, which enhanced the credibility of the research and ensured the integrity of the findings.

Participants comprised of n=8 practitioners (female=5; male=3) and this represented 100% of the population currently delivering HELP in the site CRC. Following the field work stage there has been a recruitment drive and training packages for practitioners delivering programmes in the site CRC. There are other examples of research conducted in probation practice with a similar sample size (Farrow, 2004; McCulloch, 2005; Palmer and Smith, 2010). The researcher's sample size is similar to previous projects, so it is in keeping with the flow of current studies in this field. At the time of conducting this study, the programme lead acted as the gatekeeper to establish contact with practitioners, and participants were recruited via an opportunistic, snowball sampling approach until it was believed that data saturation had been reached. The participants had been provided with training for their role

and were receiving continued support from the CRC if applicable. Any practitioner who wanted to take part in the study was scheduled with a time and date for the interview.

This particular study focuses on interviews conducted with practitioners and explores their perceptions of the HELP programme delivered in a CRC in England and Wales. Prior to conducting the interviews, information sheets, consent forms and ethical rights forms were given to participants. This included written informed consent from participants, who were reminded of their right to withhold any information that they did not wish to share. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any time, without reason, and have their information destroyed, without this affecting them professionally. The participants were interviewed individually by the researcher Woolford across the six local delivery units in the CRC. A semi-structured interview schedule was designed to elicit information regarding participants' perceptions of HELP. The interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and lasted for an average of 59 minutes, with a range of 31.24–105.59 minutes.

Thematic analysis was used by the researcher Woolford and co-author Wardhaugh to analyse the transcripts. The researcher Woolford was able to construct questions, allowing interviewees the freedom to respond. This provided a 'therapeutic' way of generating a wealth of rich data from practitioners of the HELP programme. This method was chosen because it is appropriate for effectively describing and summarising the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Howitt, 2010). The researchers had some understanding of the transcripts after conducting the interviews; however, these were re-read to ensure greater familiarity with the data. Interesting concepts and experiences of the participants relating to the HELP programme were then coded on the transcripts and formed the basis of the sub-themes. The analysis was reviewed by co-author Wardhaugh to increase the reliability of the findings. Any discrepancies that arose in this process between researcher Woolford and co-author Wardhaugh were deliberated on until an agreement was reached. Following this, the themes were refined and defined to ensure that each one was distinct and could be easily differentiated. The key themes explored throughout the interviews included:

- The delivery approach to HELP; thoughts on the manual and theories
- The flexibility of HELP
- The content of HELP; thoughts on the manual
- The referral process to HELP (various topics discussed included staffing levels, the referral process, attendance/attrition and behaviour)
- Professional commitment from practitioners delivering HELP

The quotes that most clearly illustrate the themes and sub-themes were selected and used to organise the findings. The themes and opinions of the practitioners are discussed in the results alongside a number of preliminary learnings and opportunities to build further evaluations on the present study.

Results

Delivery approach

One of the first topics explored with practitioners in the study was the innovative approach in delivering the HELP programme. The programme components of HELP adopt a strength-based model using current desistance literature. This facilitates the opportunity for encouraging meaningful activities and provides an accessible programme for people on probation. Within a criminal justice setting, there is often a strong focus on identifying and targeting risk factors in an effort to reduce the likelihood of reoffending. There is often less attention focused on identifying and building personal strengths. However, it has been suggested that this bias can demotivate people on probation in the criminal justice system (Attrill and Liell, 2007). Practitioners in the study emphasised that the theoretical underpinnings and approach to delivering HELP fitted current thinking on desistance.

HELP a programme is collaborative, empathic and person-centred. It does not solely focus on a service user's offence. If we work collaboratively with service users, it gives them the opportunity to learn new skills and tools to change their lives. This is why, I am really enthusiastic about delivering HELP as a domestic violence programme (Participant 006).

Therefore, focusing on strengths rather than over-emphasising risks is arguably a more useful way of assisting desistance. Practitioners in the study were careful to create a safe environment for open discussions and be non-judgemental in their work. The approach facilitated flexible delivery, enabling practitioners to listen to, support and challenge people on probation in a holistic way. As Maruna et al. (2004) suggest, staff in the criminal justice system need to 'mind their language' and their underlying attitudes and should communicate a strong optimistic message about the potential for desistance. In addition, it can be suggested that criminal justice system staff who have high expectations of others are more likely to increase determined attempts to change (Maruna and LeBel, 2010). The practitioners in this study all demonstrated a strong professional desire to listen to and encourage people on probation in the group sessions. Furthermore, HELP's approach gave them the opportunity to do this:

The majority of men with fairly multifaceted stories feel that they have been judged and labelled as a bad guy and that will never change... it is our responsibility to skilfully create a safe environment to discuss and challenge sensitive subject areas of a really personal nature. We build on trust and gather an energised momentum to help service users get to where they want to be in their relationships... If we can do that it's amazing, but it will never be a smooth linear process (Participant 004).

Throughout the interviews, practitioners reflected on establishing a safe environment, with good rapport and open communication enhanced by humorous exchanges. This created the space for individuals to review and revise their viewpoint. Thus, practitioners were committed to helping the group members change their attitudes and behaviours in order to build healthy relationships. The practitioners also emphasised that HELP had 'real world application' for people on probation due to the skills that they learnt throughout the

programme. This would create a sense of usefulness in attending HELP, as it gives the opportunity for frank and honest discussion, developing skills in empathy, trust and communication. This can aid the internal mindsets that are important for desistance (Maguire and Raynor, 2006). It has also been said that programmes can help desistance by offering a 'blueprint' for change (Giordano et al., 2002). Practitioners depicted vivid illustrations of an individual's change in perceptions through having a 'real world application'. Firstly, HELP aimed to challenge behaviours and attitudes that thwarted healthy relationships. There were numerous examples of successful stories; the two most poignant are outlined below.

It was the first HELP I had facilitated and service user (x) walked in and he wasn't very pleasant at the taster session... As the weeks progressed he began to relax, open up and confidence was being built. Each week he really started to take on the content of HELP... A few months after completing HELP we met in the office and he spoke about how he was now making real progress with their social workers and was optimistic about the future with his family (Participant 007).

I had a service user who really had hit an all-time low... His relationship was at a point of chronic dysfunctionality and his child was recommended for adoption. He came to the group with a whole bunch of assumptions about the programme, the other people on it and what we as facilitators represent. As the weeks progressed he embraced the content, he understood it and most importantly invested in it... If we skip forward two years, he is now a mentor for the service and the child is in his parent's care thriving which is an amazing and wonderful story (Participant 004).

Furthermore, practitioners aim to build a mental bridge between the impact of an individual's behaviour and lifestyle and their intimate relationship. For example, practitioners described scenarios of young men partying at the weekend, resulting in spending too much money, letting family down or being exposed to more risk-taking opportunities. As a consequence, this has emotional or financial impacts on their intimate relationships. HELP supported individuals to develop the skills and tools to make practical changes that will break the cycle of unhealthy relationships and reaffirms that the group work has 'real life application'. In addition, HELP often went further than simply addressing personal relationships; the skills learnt could also be adapted to interacting with support networks in the criminal justice system.

HELP enables service users to see and engage in services in a whole new light, whether it is social care or probation. Often service users recall the same experiences and attitudes: not supported, not listened to, punished and judged. Facilitating a group in HELP has a different approach; we build up a rapport with service users as the weeks progress giving people the opportunity to learn new skills. Building this relationship gives people a different experience and perspective of professionals that they can then use to engage with services in the community (Participant 008).

Programmes and training can build a better capacity to achieve a non-criminal lifestyle, but only communities can provide the opportunities to turn this learning into action (Thompson, 2008). As McNeill (2016: 204) convincingly argues, 'no amount of personal change can secure desistance if change is not recognised and supported by the community (social rehabilitation), by the law and by the state (judicial rehabilitation)'. Practitioners suggested that individuals who successfully completed the HELP sessions learnt new skills and tools for sustaining healthy relationships to better equip and harness the opportunity for social reintegration into the community. Similar to other programmes in the criminal justice system, there is an acknowledgement from practitioners of the limitations of group-work programmes. As desistance literature suggests, simply completing a programme won't facilitate sustained abstinence from offending behaviour without also recognising the need for attention to external desistance factors. Furthermore, few desisters say that a programme was entirely responsible for them not offending (Farrall, 2002).

We are not under any illusions, it's only 15 sessions, this is a very tiny part of a service user's life. People have a lot of complex issues going on in their personal lives... However, HELP can plant a lot of seeds that might be cross-fertilised at a later date (Participant 001).

The sensitive subject area of domestic abuse evokes heightened emotional responses due to its taboo status in societal norms and values. The practitioners involved in these interviews clearly demonstrated that creating a safe environment where people on probation could express themselves without fear of judgement was intrinsic in adopting a strength-based approach to rehabilitation. The practitioners considered that the short-term behavioural change explored in the interviews led to increased engagement and successful completion of the HELP programme.

Flexibility

The second topic explored with practitioners in the study was the flexible format of the HELP programme. Put simply, there is a need to match the delivery style of treatment programmes to each individual (Andrews and Bonta, 2011). For example, 'which methods work best, for which types of offenders, and under what conditions or in what types setting' (Palmer, 1975: 150). The flexibility of HELP's programme components represents both the facilitators of and the barriers to delivering a domestic abuse prevention programme. Flexibility facilitates opportunities to encourage practitioners' creativity in delivering the programme and to increase engagement with and successful completion of HELP. One of the barriers that the practitioners associated with flexibility is the potential to give individuals too many chances to complete the programme.

The flexible format of HELP enabled practitioners to use their professional judgement in delivering group work. As discussed earlier, HELP is based on person-centred practice and a strength-based model. It has been designed to be delivered in a way that is unlike a school format. In the main, people on probation have had poor experiences in school and within the education system. Previous research has shown that in comparison to the general population, people on probation have low basic skills and poor school experiences and are without vocational or academic qualifications. Historically, studies have found people on probation in custody to be semi-literate (Palfrey, 1974), have a low level of literacy (Adult

Learning and Basic Skills Unit, 1994) or have poor reading, writing and numeracy skills (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). Therefore, a programme that relies heavily on reading and writing can inhibit engagement in the sessions. HELP has been designed to be delivered flexibly to people on probation.

HELP is not an intellectual exercise... It's not school or a college course. For HELP to be an effective learning experiences it must touch service users emotionally and is relevant to their personal experiences... We use personal experiences that are applicable to service users' lives, translating the theory into practice (Participant 003).

A high proportion of people in contact with the criminal justice system experience multiple or complex needs. People can experience several problems at the same time, such as drug and alcohol misuse, family breakdown or mental ill health, to mention but a few. People on probation with multiple needs and exclusions are living chaotic lives and need understanding and co-ordinated support. The practitioners emphasised that HELP's delivery format allowed them to deliver the programme and deal with a crisis point.

If a service user came in with a crisis, we can still deliver the programme and deal with their crisis. We have three hooks; as long as these hooks are covered in the group session we can use real life scenarios and it really resonates with the group (Participant 002).

This delivery format was well received by people on probation, as it gave them an opportunity to become active participants in the group. The practitioners reflected that it gave individuals the time and space to open up about their thoughts and feelings, and gain skills and a sense of self-worth. For instance, Maruna (2001) found that persistent people on probation saw themselves as 'doomed to deviance', whereas desisters believed that their past offending was 'not the real me'. The concepts of 'primary' and 'secondary' desistance were developed by Maruna and Farrall (2004), referring to firstly a period of non-offending and secondly a change in an 'offender' self-identity. The term 'tertiary desistance' is now being used by McNeill (2016) to highlight the recognition by others of change and to develop a sense of belonging. Practitioners in this study highlighted that HELP created the opportunity for people on probation to see themselves, and to be seen by others, in a new light:

Service users are trying on a new identity of life, they are trying a new way of doing things. We give people the space within the sessions to try on this new identity and explore new avenues in a fairly fluid way (Participant 003).

Although the flexible format of the HELP programme has many advantages, there were practical limitations discussed during the interviews. Most notably, these included giving an individual too many chances to engage with the programme. One practitioner aptly describes the conundrum:

Our biggest strength in delivering HELP in a flexible format is also one of our weaknesses. I think we really try hard with people, giving them chances, encouraging them to stick with the sessions. We will do all that we can to motivate and for whatever reason; not the right time or just unresponsive there is just no engagement (Participant 002).

Due to the sensitive nature of domestic abuse, practitioners emphasised the importance of a flexible and fluid format for delivering HELP. Practitioners involved in these interviews encouraged communication, reflection and listening skills to positively deal with real life scenarios and to develop emotional recognition. The short-term behavioural change explored in the interviews included suggestions from practitioners to use responsivity in a fluid and flexible format to increase engagement and successful completion of the HELP programme.

Content

The third topic explored with practitioners in the study was the content of the HELP programme. The programme components adopt a therapeutic alliance and encourage group cohesion and accessibility for people on probation. The practitioners worked collaboratively, responding to individual needs within the group, to build a sense of belonging and commitment from group members that enables peer challenges and development. Practitioners delivering HELP perceived the sequence of sessions as logical, progressing into more sensitive subject areas as the cohesion of the group developed. Three sessions were regarded as the most impactful for people on probation completing the HELP programme: empathy, belief and trust.

Firstly, having strong empathy builds bridges with other people within personal relationships, while lack of empathy would create barriers in healthy relationships. The literature suggests that people who feel and show concern and empathy for others are more likely to desist from crime (Bottoms and Shapland, 2010). Secondly, beliefs provide the framework for subsequent thinking: the attitudes that people on probation hold about themselves and the world around them. As the literature suggests, people on probation who do not define themselves purely as 'offenders' and have a non-criminal identity find it easier to desist (Chiricos et al., 2007; Maruna, 2001). Thirdly, trust is a complex issue and affects people on probation deeply; therefore, it is not an easy 'fix' in personal relationships. Trust is particularly important, as it helps to identify specifically where the relationship is strong or weak.

In addition, the visual aids used throughout HELP are easy for individuals to remember and apply in their daily lives. Mirroring earlier discussions about 'real world application', there were two especially notable visual aids utilised in HELP; the hype-ometer scale and the tree model. The hype-ometer scale can be used to measure how an individual is feeling. This is a good method of establishing the emotional state of an individual and discussing whether this is helpful or not (see Figure 1).

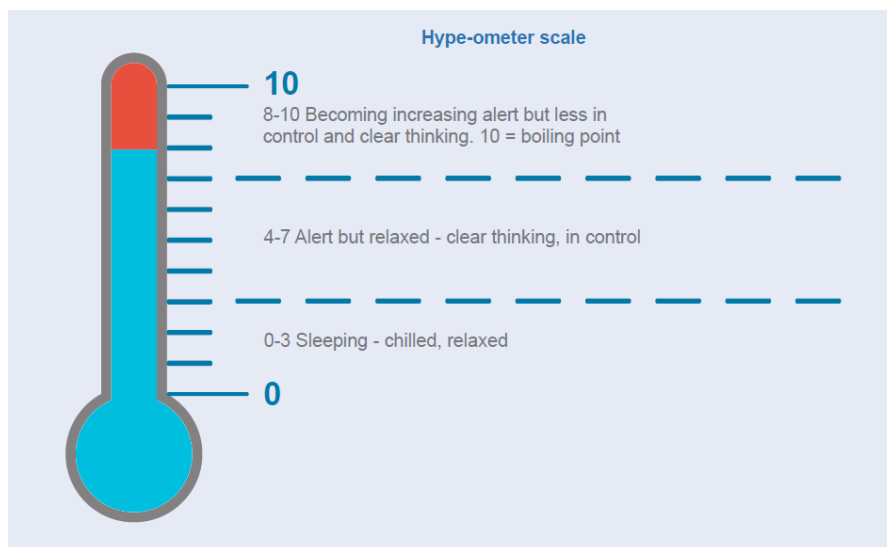


Figure 1. Hype-ometer scale. Taken from: Green, C. and Cook, R. Session 9 – Overview: Hypo-meter Scale [Image]. Retrieved from HELP Delivery Manual. Copyright 2019: 67 by Facilitator and Programmes Lead.

Practitioners emphasised the use of the hype-ometer as a technique to calm down and think clearly to manage one's emotions, which increases confidence and resilience in order to build a healthy relationship. The uptake of the hype-ometer scale demonstrated engagement with the HELP programme. The practitioners depicted conversations with individuals on their use of the scale in everyday life:

Service user (x) was talking about using the hype-ometer scale on a building site with his friends. They tell each other if they think anyone is above 8 on the scale; not thinking clearly or in control. It's a simple tool that can be easily applied in different situations for service users to stop and think rather than just reacting (Participant 007).

Practitioners also emphasised the usefulness of the tree model to establish the concept that an individual's attitude impacts on their approach to behaviours or situations. Ultimately, core attitudes and beliefs need to be meaningful to the individual. The tree model identifies how the mindset affects subsequent thinking, emotions and likely behaviour. It identifies key beliefs and then leads the individual to consider how this mindset would affect subsequent thinking, emotions and finally the likely behaviour (see Figure 2).

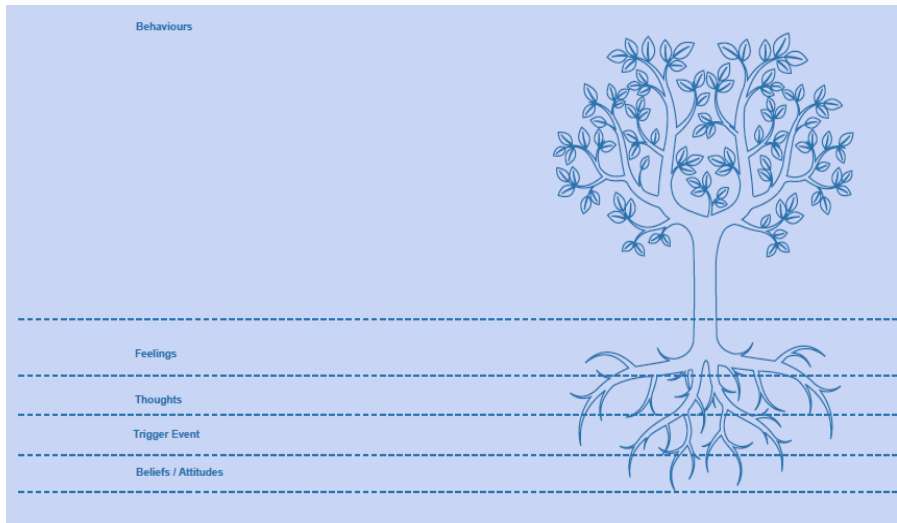


Figure 2. The tree model. Taken from: Green, C. and Cook, R. Handout 2: Tree Model [Image]. Retrieved from HELP Delivery Manual. Copyright 2019: 88 by Facilitator and Programmes Lead.

Practitioners described the usefulness of the tree model to encourage individuals to reflect on attitudes and responsibilities in everyday life:

The belief tree really resonates with service users. We look at the root of the tree to see how beliefs, thoughts and feelings affect the branches of the tree; the behaviour. The tree model highlights how beliefs can heavily influence a person's actions. This encourages people to look a little deeper and see where they see themselves in a relationship or family unit... emphasising the importance of making sense of what you want and what you can do before taking action (Participant 006).

Throughout the interviews, practitioners highlighted the sequential content of HELP as being useful in resonating with individuals attending the programme. Practitioners did acknowledge that there were modules that were difficult to deliver due to the sensitive subject area of HELP. The optimistic message shared by practitioners was for facilitators to ensure their approach was realistic and constructive for people on probation. The short-term behavioural change explored in the interviews included suggestions from practitioners to build on a therapeutic alliance, group cohesion and accessibility to increase engagement and successful completion of the HELP programme.

Referral process

The fourth topic that was explored with practitioners in the study was the referral process to the HELP programme. The programme components needed clear guidance on the eligibility and suitability of potential referrals to the HELP programme. The basic suitability matrix criteria for HELP is found in the manual. Practitioners in the interviews emphasised the importance of referring people on probation at the right time in their order and of

having a readiness to change their attitude. Considerable research now suggests that individuals who desist from crime are usually motivated to change their lives and feel confident that they can turn things around. Those individuals who clearly say they want to stop offending are the most likely to desist (Bottoms and Shapland, 2010; Burnett and Maruna, 2004). The impact of these motivational factors can last for up to ten years after release from prison (LeBel et al., 2008). Inappropriate referrals may increase the risk of reconviction or harm. Those who show little regard for the personal consequences of their behaviour are more likely to not comply with programme attendance requirements and to reoffend (Hanson and Wallace-Capretta 2000).

The importance of suitability criteria is intrinsic to the overall success of HELP. The practitioners did highlight that this was an issue within the referral process. Unlike accredited programmes, the referral process is not a statutory court order. Therefore, the referral into HELP is often not a linear process. Anecdotal evidence from practitioners suggested that external support from a person's case manager or social worker tended to increase their likelihood of success with HELP. Research supports this finding by emphasising the importance of external support, most notably crediting case managers as helping people desist from crime when the case manager was seen as being committed, fair, and encouraging and the relationship was seen as active and participatory (Rex, 1999). However, throughout the interviews there were numerous examples of referrals that were inappropriate due to a lack of motivation or readiness to change on the part of people on probation:

When a service user is not in the right mindset they struggle on the programme. Their attitudes and behaviours are just in a place of wanting to blame, make excuses and not willing to face the consequences of their actions... Putting them on HELP is more detrimental than constructive... So we do have issues with inappropriate referrals (Participant 005).

Therefore, establishing key indicators that would suggest an individual is ready to begin their journey to desistance and move forward with healthy relationships is necessary. Practitioners expanded further on the problem of referrals, depicting that a common occurrence is when the individual is not ready to change their attitudes and behaviours:

A classic example would be for a service user to resume a chaotic and unhealthy relationship without acknowledging the deep-rooted issues... the problems escalate and spiral out of control. Then pride and embarrassment inhibits a service user to admit that they are struggling and need help from us (Participant 004).

In addition, practitioners delivering HELP were concerned about the referral process and being unprepared in relation to background checks on individuals attending the programme. In the CRC there is a strong reliance on sessional staff to deliver programmes due to the current economic climate and case manager caseloads. Predominantly, the concern was over risk assessments. This lack of preparation was felt most deeply by the sessional staff delivering HELP.

I would like a little more information... a little more time to prepare. Sometimes we deliver the group a little unprepared. We are always cautious in what we say but just having a bit of background on service users would clue us up on risk, triggers and sensitive subjects (Participant 007).

The commitment and dedication of practitioners was evident throughout the interviews; many of the interviewees offered direct solutions to the issue of referrals. Practitioners suggested that between point of referral and beginning the programme there should be time allocated for preparation and gathering information on individuals attending HELP. This would give practitioners delivering the programme an opportunity to gain an insight into risk, readiness to change and potential dynamics within a group setting. More could be done to prepare, orient and motivate individuals to take full advantage of programmes (Gondolf, 2002). Throughout the interviews, practitioners highlighted that an area for improvement for HELP would be to strengthen the referral process and for staff delivering the programme to have more information on individuals. The short-term behavioural change explored in the interviews included the processes of referral and the extent to which the person meets the suitability criteria for the successful completion of the HELP programme.

Professional commitment of practitioners

The fifth topic explored with practitioners in the study was the professional commitment to the HELP programme. Committed practitioners are likely to provide a more consistent, stable and good-quality service (Collins, 2016). It is notable that many desisters talk about the powerful effect of having someone believe in them (Rex, 1999). Many people on probation are strongly encouraged by someone else believing that they can and will change, that they are good people and that they have something to offer society or other people (McNeill et al., 2005). Professional commitment has been defined as 'one's attitude towards one's profession or vocation' (Blau, 1985:20). It can also be seen as a measure, or indicator, of behaviour towards one's profession and the efforts that are invested in it (Freund et al., 2012; Giffords 2010). The motivators and drivers for making a positive difference to people on probation was demonstrated throughout the interviews.

I deliver HELP because I think it makes a difference to a service user's life... We deliver in a way that is useable in real life which is really refreshing (Participant 001).

Research has suggested that personal history factors, such as experiencing or witnessing violence in the family, emerge as prominent risk factors for partner violence by men (Jewkes, 2002; Kropp, 2002; Riggs et al., 2000; Schumacher et al., 2001; World Health Organization, 2002). One practitioner vividly depicted HELP's aims to challenge attitudes and behaviours that may have been observed or learnt by individuals:

The spirit of delivering HELP for me comes from wanting to make some positive difference in our community. Parents hurt each other, children get caught up in it and then their expectations of relationships are very low. The cycle then repeats itself. It would be great to think that we're putting an end to some of these destructive cycles (Participant 002).

Practitioners emphasised the professional satisfaction of making a positive change to an individual's life. People who feel that they are a welcomed part of society are less likely to offend than those who feel stigmatised (LeBel et al., 2008). Explanations for desistance from offending tend to stress aging and developing maturity, the development of positive social bonds and changes in the way that (former) people on probation construct their personal and social identities. Practitioners gave examples of people on probation who had developed thinking and communication skills and increased in confidence. This promoted feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-sufficiency.

I think in terms of seeing a demonstrable change in an individual's confidence, an acceptance of responsibility and the ability to recognise issues that have previously affected a relationship then HELP has done well as a programme (Participant 001).

We want service users to apply the learning from HELP into their life to establish healthy relationships... As the weeks progress we see personal gains for service users in terms of self-confidence, self-belief and self-worth... all of these personal attributes can only aid an individual's rehabilitation (Participant 004).

In order to develop professionally and increase their commitment, practitioners need to have an ongoing and dynamic training strategy in place. This is especially true in relation to the subject area of domestic abuse and the emotions attached to it. Insights from academics would also be useful to bridge the gap. The practitioners in the interviews emphasised that the training in delivering HELP was extremely useful. In addition, they displayed both knowledge and confidence in the content and material provided for them to deliver HELP to people on probation.

The training was really helpful, this is a new approach and a new way of working with service users... supportive, non-judgemental, empathetic, building a relationship and being holistic. I think the training really demonstrates how instrumental the approach of staff are in the overall success of HELP (Participant 008).

Furthermore, the practitioners emphasised the importance of having regular feedback to provide an element of quality assurance. Practitioners did mention a variety of informal support methods which created casual learning in a flexible way; for example, through observing others, chatting amongst themselves and having the opportunity to have a question answered over the phone. However, there was no formal, structured and curricula-mapped quality assurance framework. Quality assurance is a systematic way of establishing and maintaining quality improvement activities as an integral and sustainable part of an organisation's daily practice. Delivering the group-work elements of the programmes is challenging though, and the manuals cannot guide the practitioners in all the scenarios they may face. Hence, a strong framework for monitoring and supporting practitioners is important. A committed and active involvement are critical in order to ensure that programmes are suitable, effective and efficient. Providing a high-quality

programme is of paramount importance to fully satisfy individuals' needs and expectations. Practitioners discussed that quality assurance of their work had not been built into the process or structure of delivering HELP and welcomed the opportunity for it to be implemented.

I would like to be quality assessed... it's nice to get that feedback about how you are delivering HELP. From the way service user responds it would suggest I am doing well, but I am sure there are things that I could improve on... I would like a more structured way of receiving feedback rather than waiting for an issue to arise (Participant 002).

Throughout the interviews, practitioners' professional commitment to delivering HELP was clearly an asset to the overall success of engaging people in the programme. The practitioners delivering HELP included a range of professionals in the CRC with a variety of backgrounds, skills and perspectives. The data revealed a change in the practitioners' behaviour and identified an increase in their professional commitment to motivate, engage and support people on probation to successfully complete the HELP programme.

Limitations

Although this research was carefully prepared, it is important to acknowledge the limitations and shortcomings of the study. Firstly, due to the time limit and current staffing levels the research was conducted using a relatively small sample; participants were selected from those who currently deliver the HELP programme in the CRC. There have been many debates among researchers as to what constitutes a sufficient sample size in qualitative research, ranging from five to fifty depending on the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the quality of the data and the study design (Bernard, 2000; Bertaux, 1981; Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994). Although the findings of the study are very positive, because the fieldwork was conducted in one CRC only, these findings may not translate to the views of practitioners in other CRCs in England and Wales.

Secondly, as a qualitative study there was no attempt to assign frequencies to the linguistic features which were identified in the data. Therefore, it could be suggested that rare phenomena may have received the same amount of attention as more frequent phenomena. However, the core research question needed to be understood 'through the eyes of those being investigated' (Bryman et al., 1988:16). Furthermore, it could be suggested that imposing casual determination through coding and standardising may have destroyed valuable data on explanations, conclusions and attaching meaning. Notwithstanding these acknowledged limitations, the success and value that CRC practitioners attach to the programme would suggest strongly that a wider roll out of HELP across other CRCs would be a positive proactive strategy for successfully addressing the issue of domestic abuse.

Conclusion

Domestic abuse is a significant issue in terms of impact and prevalence, with wide-reaching potential implications for children, families and communities. Domestic abuse is now on such a scale that concerted action is being taken across a wide range of agencies at local

and national levels. There are many existing programmes in the criminal justice system to address problems that are identified. This study examines the perspective of practitioners in a CRC on their programme, HELP, for perpetrators of domestic abuse.

This study has outlined the delivery approach, the flexible format, the content, the referral process and the professional commitment of practitioners delivering HELP in the CRC. Five themes vividly depicted both the facilitators of and barriers to HELP. Practitioners emphasised that the promising attributes of HELP were founded in its innovative and flexible approach to delivery, aided by the real life application of the programme content. In addition, the professional commitment from practitioners delivering HELP was intrinsic to the overall success of the programme. However, the programme did become limited due to discrepancies in the referral process. The practitioners discussed topics that had a negative impact on engagement with HELP; these included attendance, attrition and behaviour. This study strongly suggests that HELP is an innovative programme, highlights positive examples of practitioners' practice and aligns with current thinking in the field of desistance.

Preliminary learnings

A number of preliminary learnings have been obtained through interviewing practitioners involved in delivering the HELP programme. Firstly, comprehensive implementation strategies for HELP may improve rehabilitation outcomes if various barriers to screening and referrals are addressed. Processes and procedures could be devised through collaboration with practitioners delivering HELP to reduce confusion about suitability and readiness to change. Secondly, in an effort to reduce the likelihood of HELP being diluted during the roll-out process, it would be advisable for current practitioners to be consulted in the training packages and made available as mentors to demonstrate transparency, increasing confidence in and enthusiasm for delivering HELP. Finally, this study and its findings have relevance beyond this CRC by highlighting best practice for agencies, regionally and nationally.

The study identifies a promising approach which, with further development and testing, could enable substantially more effective prevention of domestic abuse in a probation setting. There are a number of gaps in our knowledge around the HELP programme that would benefit from further research. Firstly, a more in-depth exploration of the impact of HELP could consider the perspective of people on probation. Secondly, it would also be interesting to capture qualitatively the experiences and perspectives of the more marginalised and seldom-heard groups involved in research (for example, people on probation who have dropped off the HELP programme) to understand the potential mixed or negative experiences. Thirdly, more methodological work is needed on how to robustly capture the impact and outcomes of sustaining healthy relationships, including proven reoffending data.

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