

February 2018 Trust Board – Sarah's story

Sarah* is a 17 year old girl from Skipton who uses safer space regularly in a planned and preventative way to reduce the risk of self-harm, suicide attempts and hospital admission. Sarah lives at home with her parents; her dad has a complex physical health condition and her younger brother has learning difficulties. Sarah and her mother are both carers for her dad and younger brother. Sarah has a diagnosis of emotional dysregulation and she experiences anxiety, low mood, chronic suicidality and deliberate self-harm (DSH) behaviour (overdose, ligature and cutting).

In November 2016 Sarah was admitted to hospital following an overdose; she spent several days on a paediatric ward as a result. She self-harmed several times whilst on the ward and reported to the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) that if she returned home she would harm herself more severely and likely take another overdose. Additionally, Sarah's mother did not feel she could keep Sarah safe if she returned home and was very anxious about her impending discharge.

When working with CAMHS on a discharge plan, one of Sarah's main triggers was identified as her return to college on a Monday following the weekend off; she experienced heightened levels of anxiety on a Sunday evening and would resort to DSH. She explained that she experienced intense suicidal thoughts on these nights and constantly thought about and felt tempted to overdose on her dad's tramadol.

Her CAMHS key worker and psychiatrist therefore arranged for Sarah to use safer space as a respite option as part of her discharge plan. It was agreed by CAMHS, First Response and Creative Support that Sarah could use the Safer Space on a Sunday night if she felt she couldn't keep herself safe at home. Arrangements were put in place for her key worker at college to meet her outside on a Monday morning and walk with her into the building. Sarah used safer space three times over the next two months, helping her with the difficult step down from hospital and return to college. Sarah found the space very effective, describing it as non-judgmental and 'like a home from home'. Staff were able to monitor her and provide support throughout the night, if needed, to keep Sarah safe.

After the first two months Sarah found that the peace of mind from knowing that there was a safe, welcoming place for her to go was often enough to keep her well.

Sarah started becoming unwell again in spring 2017 and wished to use safer space again; she was advised by her grandma, however, that she should learn to cope on her own and should not 'run away' to the safer space. Sarah took this advice to heart and therefore did not use the space. During this time she became acutely unwell, took a significant overdose and was admitted to a tier 4 (for the most severe mental health problems) unit in Bury where she stayed for several months. As part of her discharge plan from the tier 4 unit,

Sarah's psychiatrist recommended returning to the use of safer space as a respite option to support Sarah's step down to home and to prevent hospital re-admission.

Sarah returned to safer space in January 2018; she explained to staff why she had stopped coming and was assured by them that her use of the service is a huge protective factor for her and it's a sign of strength that she has the self-awareness to know when she needs it and is able to reach out and access it. Since then Sarah has used the space every Sunday night. She used it twice in one week when her parents were going away on a weeknight to a medical appointment for her father. Sarah recognised that her parents being away from home would be a major trigger, so it was arranged for her to attend the safer space on that night. This prevented crisis and supported Sarah to keep herself safe; she engaged in baking activities with the staff when she arrived, she got a good night's sleep then made and ate breakfast with the staff in the morning before making her own way to college.

Sarah's ability to use the space as and when needed has empowered her around her self-care. She knows the staff team well and describes feeling a sense of belonging at the space; that it feels like a place for her, where she isn't a burden, she has her own space and she can use it how she wants and needs. Sarah completes a short feedback form after each stay; through these she has reported that the staff are welcoming, supportive and friendly; that she enjoys the range of activities and the fact that the space has lattes; she always feels welcomed, listened to, valued, safe and able to make choices; and she has reported on numerous occasions that if she hadn't come to safer space she would have hurt herself or made an attempt on her life.

Safer space is an essential part of a holistic wraparound package of support that is helping Sarah to stay well on her discharge from the tier 4 unit. The safer space offers much needed support at night when she is most vulnerable and no one else is around to support her and keep her safe. Additionally, she has a buddy from Youth in Mind who she sees once a week, helping with exposure work to promote her independence. She sees CAMHS twice weekly and can access additional telephone support if needed. Sarah is also getting young carers' support and she has started attending a group with the Prince's Trust; this group do a four-week community development project once a year and Sarah nominated safer space to be this year's project. The whole group came to visit the space and was highly enthusiastic about doing the project there. They have arranged to build garden furniture and create a range of planters for the back yard (a space often used by young people who stay at the space), and are raising money to buy furniture and artwork for two currently unused rooms on the top floor of the building. These will be offered for free to voluntary community services and statutory or health partners to use as one-to-one or small group therapy rooms. Sarah feels an enormous sense of pride and ownership over the space now that she is using it independently and is actively supporting the staff to improve and shape the service.

Sarah thoroughly enjoys and looks forward to her stays at the space and is using them successfully to give herself and her parents a break, to keep herself safe, to improve her resilience and confidence, and to stay out of hospital.

(*Name has been changed for anonymity.)