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Befriending Services for the Elderly

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I would like to briefly introduce befriending services based on a literature review, focusing primarily on services provided to the elderly.

„Befriending is an emotional supportive relationship in which one-to-one companionship is provided on a regular basis by a volunteer” (Siette et al., 2017: 1). Formal befriending programs to address the suicidal crisis were developed in the early 1960s. The practice of befriending has become known and accepted (Siette et al., 2017), these services are now widespread in the EU, UK, USA, Australia, Canada (Fakoya et al., 2021) and in Singapore. "The practice of befriending has been largely adopted by the voluntary sector, with over 3500 schemes existing in the UK alone, where volunteers support a range of populations" (Siette et al., 2017: 1). The befriending service can have many target groups, for example children and young people, families, the elderly, people with mental problems, caregivers or disabled people.

The purpose of befriending services for the elderly is to prevent and alleviate loneliness and isolation. Loneliness is the main risk factor for depression in old age (Kabátová et al., 2016) and it is associated with lower physical performance (Philip et al., 2020), is often associated with anxiety and depression (Yu et al., 2020) and may be a risk factor for early mortality (Luo et al., 2012). The lonelier elderly is more likely to have a negative psychological well-being

and have more psychosomatic symptoms (Pukánszky et al., 2021). Loneliness and isolation therefore pose a serious health risk, which is why we need to find solutions that help overcome them (Tóth, 2022). The befriending service for the elderly is an excellent opportunity, fostering a meaningful relationship for both service users and volunteers, ensuring social support for the elderly and also acting as an early warning system (Jopling & Jones, 2021). In the United Kingdom, volunteer befriending/good neighbour services are used in end-of-life care to ensure home-based support (companionship, information). In a research (Walshe et al., 2016) these services were examined, their key findings were that befriending means a lot to the elderly receiving the service, they described social and psychological benefits. This support is unique and helps to slow a decline in quality of life at the end of life (Walshe et al., 2016).

Models of befriending are: face to face one to one befriending, distance befriending, group befriending and peer support, of course a blended model also possible (http1). The face to face meeting can take place at the befriender's home or in a community, public place. Loneliness and isolation of the elderly can be reduced by applying information communication technology for providing social support and mental health services (Bene et al., 2020; Tóth, 2017; Tóth, 2022). „Distance Befriending can describe any befriending relationship which can be conducted from a distance using some form of communication technology” (http2: 3), such as telephone, instant messaging, video conferencing. It is essential when providing befriending services that the safety of all participants is guaranteed. For this, it is very important to properly select and train the volunteers and to carefully match the befriender and befriender. The work of service providers is supported by numerous guidelines and networks have been created where professional support is also provided. Fakoya and her co-authors point out that “services should be tailored to the needs of service users and take into consideration characteristics including mobility, impairments e.g. physical, sensory and/or cognitive, as well as the influence of service characteristics including payment for befrienders, fixed/long-term befriending relationship, one-to-one support and the impact of non-verbal communication via face-to-face delivery” (Fakoya et al., 2021: 1).

In summary it can be said that it seems that befriending is a promising, gap-filling service that provides social support to the elderly, which can reduce their loneliness, isolation and the resulting mental and health problems, and can improve the quality of their life. However, we can also claim that we don't know enough about the effectiveness of these services, there has been relatively little research on this topic (Siette et al., 2017).

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http2

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