



Gentle Activism- Episode 1

“A place where self-injury is accepted and understood”

Transcript

(0:00)

Host- Marnie: This episode contains discussion of childhood sexual abuse, self-injury and cutting. If you're troubled by any of the issues raised in this podcast, please visit the self-injury support website at www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk where you can find more information about self-injury and how to access support. You can also call the Samaritans at 116 123.

***Phone rings 3 times* Hannah:** Women's Crisis Service, hello?

Theme Tune- Eirlys Rhiannon, Mother's Daughter

Marnie: In 1986, a pioneering group of women founded Bristol Crisis Service for Women, or BCSW. At the intersection of the feminist and survivor movement, these women rejected the damaging diagnoses and treatments offered by mainstream services. They began to find their own solutions. Ultimately, they wanted services that listen to them, that saw beyond the surface of their self-injury, and uncover the personal and societal roots of their issues. 35 years later, with a name change to Self Injury Support, their legacy lives on. Gentle Activism records the voices of women past and present, who made self-injury support what it is today and captures the ground-breaking history of Bristol Crisis Service for Women.

Elin: What made you want to get involved with BCSW?

Jess, support services volunteer and staff, 2018 to present: I was working in housing benefits,

Catherine S, helpline volunteer, 2008 to 2009: A veterinary nurse

Sarah B, helpline volunteer, 2003 to 2008: At a bit of a hiatus in my career,

Sal, collective member, volunteer, freelance trainer and staff, 1996 to 2021: I was pregnant, young. You know, nobody had really taken much of a punt on me before.

Jess, support services volunteer and staff, 2018 to present: It was, it was odd I was at a time in my life where for the first time, in a long time, I've had quite a lot of stability, which I'd never really had before. And I don't just mean sort of like sort of some financial stability, but also just a bit of, bit more, I'd overcome quite a lot of sort of mental health stuff in my life. And I really wanted to do some volunteering, and I really wanted to work in something to do

with mental health and something to do with women. And I was just looking and just found this organisation by complete chance and had absolutely no idea existed and wish I, wish I'd known it has existed.

Tessa, helpline volunteer and staff, 1994 to 1996: I'm a massive believer in phone lines, I just think they're, they're the sort of safety net at the bottom of all other services, they can often catch people who've fallen through the gaps.

Sal, collective member, volunteer, freelance trainer and staff, 1996 to 2021: There was a little tiny advert in the back of the Evening Post, which is where all the voluntary aid agencies used to apply any kind of advertising for volunteers back in the day. And it was just kind of like, it just jumped out at me as a kind of, well, you've been thinking you need to do something.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2005-2006: I think it was in the scrapstore in St Werburgh's. So there was a whole wall of flyers and leaflets about do this, do this, you know, and I was thinking, what am I what am I gonna do with my life? Now this, you know, and there were two flyers that caught my eye one was for a model for life drawing classes, and the other was volunteering to do the BC SW. Yeah, so I picked up those two flyers basically, and only give serious consideration to one of them.

Sal, collective member, volunteer, freelance trainer and staff, 1996 to 2021: Don't think I knew what I was getting myself into. *laughter*

Liz, helpline volunteer, 2005 to 2009: Thing is it was I'd, I'd always been quite interested in social change. And so I've been involved with a lot of political activism. But you might remember at that time, it wasn't that long after we went to war in Iraq and the Afghani war and things and there was quite a lot of powerlessness amongst activists at that time. And protesting felt really futile. So I still wanted to make my mark in the world and have some kind of influence and make some sort of political change. But I definitely felt like I wanted to do something different.

(4:26)

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2005-2006: I had quite a breakdown of sorts. I'd never heard of or thought about mental health or anything. I was a music graduate. It wasn't anything that had anything to do with me. Everything's was Bach, and you know, Stockhausen and and I didn't think about anything else. And then I had, you know, quite an almighty breakdown. I sort of came the way of statutory services a bit net never sort of detained or anything like that. But I did go through a bit of statutory stuff and it was all quite dreadful and brutal, you know, so I came to Bristol to get away from lot of that and did, but it was it felt like I've been quite bumped and bruised by various things and then quite a big sort of change in my life. And the thing I've moved to Bristol for that I'd hoped for that didn't turn out to be the, the answer or the way out. So it was this sort of bumpy period where I was I was better. But I had this sort of bumpy experience behind me. And I thought, Oh, I could I could I know what that's like, I know what it's like to feel terrible, I could help other

people I could, I could listen to that. That's fine, you know. And it felt like it was finally something useful I could do with it with the experience of those feelings.

Liz, helpline volunteer, 2005 to 2009: I think most people would just sort of sitting in around fairly conventional work lives or students or had like growing children. And this was their way of doing something that had purpose and was rewarding, but just connected them into something bigger and that felt vital and important.

Rosa: Can you talk me through what a shift is like? So you go to the office....

Lois, staff, 1994 to 1996: It was above a shop, which was a feminist bookshop. But the horrible thing was going there at night. Because when you went at night for the helpline you couldn't go in the front door of the shop, you had to go right around the back, which is a very, very dark yard with no lights and really scary to walk down. And you have to go in a back door. And these kind of horrible metal doors and so I remember being frightened. Coming out at night. I think I think we felt we were kind of heroines it's mad. Yeah.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2004-2006: The main door to the office was straight ahead. Then you went up this disastrously steep staircase * that left me breathless every time I climbed it. No matter how fit I thought I was.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2005-2006: I think we'd be three on, on the shift and you'd go up the stairs, it was always very quiet.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2004-2006: Dark just, where is the light switch where is the light switch, never could find the light switch. Definitely needed money being spent on it. Just *laughter* it was incredible.

Clare P, helpline volunteer and staff, 2014 to 2021: Just not ideal. The things like then there was a death square had a really noisy metal bit on it if you accidentally kicked it with your foot, like, you know, the person on the other end of the phone could hear it. It was yeah, there's quite a lot of, I guess environmental factors. It was like, kind of like taking calls and someone's extor COVID Or me.

Liz, helpline volunteer, 2005 to 2009: Everyone else was out partying. *busy street sounds, hubbub of voices*. And there we were kind of like squirrelled away. We could hear, you know, the ambulance going by *sirens* and the sounds and party goes like kind of having a fun time on the pavement at the bottom. But we were kind of tucked away doing this very focused, very kind of weighty, private thing.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2005-2006: And it was really, it was dark, it was a nice dark room. And it was it was really, again, these sort of impressionistic memories, really beautiful things. Everyone had like a little sort of Anglepoise lamp. So there was just like a little pool of lies in this darkness. And everyone just quite naturally, you'd kind of Huddle up into a corner to do your phone call. So if you went you know, for a cup of tea, and they said go and have a break after each call, because some of them Yikes, you know, you come back in and it will be this lovely dark room and the traffic outside and the lights that are coming off the window. And everyone will be in these little pools of light just murmuring talking to people.

So it was it was really restful, which was a funny contrast to some of the really jagged stuff that you heard.

Clare P, helpline volunteer and staff, 2014 to 2021: You know, the helpline room now has a really quite a powerful atmosphere when there's two or three people in there taking calls and you know, and if you're in there, I think you can really soak it up. That sense of, yeah, people just being really focused on who they're listening to. And you know, like just that sense of kind of somebody really reaching out and making those connections with people just has a kind of powerful energy I think.

(9:42)

Jess, support services volunteer and staff, 2018 to present: You leave work and you are coming in and you go "oh, I'm really knackered" and then you you get into the office, and there's just like another layer of energy that comes over you and you just kind of re you know, just... Something happens it's quite a magical space and we still sit in the kitchen together and have a cup of tea, do a catch up, say hello to each other, or the volunteers or different services sit around and chat and, and we do a little briefing of just updates of anything that's going on at the moment. And I think we need to be, you know, aware of things, you know, tricky has come up in the last week or, and then the helpline room, there's just an atmosphere that it's quite hard to describe without sitting in it. But there's just this warmth and quietness and stillness that exists in that room. Which isn't there in the day, when you sit up there as you go up there for any other reason. It's feels like a different room in the evening. You know, people sit and it's just quiet and warm and safe. And it's such a, it's quite spooky and magical. What happens in there off in that little space in that one room three nights a week. It's it's yeah, it's it's really beautiful. And it sort of is quite hard... Yeah, it's really difficult to put into words actually exactly what that feeling is. But it's, it's special.

Sal, collective member, volunteer, freelance trainer and staff, 1996 to 2021: So the phone, I don't think this has changed over 30 years, you let it ring three times no more, no less. That's, that's good practice. You pick up you go, "Hello, Bristol Crisis Service for Women. We've got up to an hour to speak tonight. It's okay to take your time I'm here to listen."

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2004-2006: Callers were generally quite silent.

Catherine S, helpline volunteer, 2008 to 2009: You know, one of the things we were sort of trained in was to kind of keep acknowledging that we were there. So I'm still here for you. And I'm still here, if you need to say anything. If not, I'm still here for you. And just kind of it felt a bit strange, repeating that maybe every 10 minutes, but and you could hear that the person was still there. But whether or not they could talk or didn't want to talk or can talk or whatever. Like I just I really felt that that having that presence there for someone was really, really important to witness. Yeah, to be with them in that pain. And for them not to be alone in that.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2004-2006: However, that's not to say that we're all silent. It's amazing just how much energy transmits down a phone line, because I never I never really understood .

Sarah B, helpline volunteer, 2003 to 2008: People didn't, people didn't often say I have, you know, I'm a victim of child sexual abuse, or I've, you know, I'm suffering domestic violence or anything like that they'd say, you said realise, while they were talking that, that that was what was happening.

Catherine S, helpline volunteer, 2008 to 2009: And then for others, it was Yeah, literally about them telling their story anonymously, I think I'm not feeling like that it was going to go anywhere else and that they didn't have to follow up or. So. Yeah, I just, I just think that those core conditions are so important. I mean, now being a counsellor, it's the it's the one thing I guess it's just always there in the background is like, actually giving somebody that sort of space to not feel judged and to feel accepted. Yeah, and just to kind of be is, is invaluable. Really.

Liz, helpline volunteer, 2005 to 2009: I just felt like for a lot of our callers that they they hadn't had that experience before. Like they haven't been really deeply listened to, you know, certainly not through their childhoods, but also by the mental health professionals that were trying to care for them. There wasn't that kind of level of understanding that Bristol Crisis Service had about the issues. Yeah, so that in that sense, it felt quite radical for them to be able to phone us and it be anonymous, and, you know, we we never phoned an ambulance. You know, we never asked for a location so that we could call emergency services, we might say, I'm wondering whether it would be best to finish this call now and phone yourself and ambulance. But they found knowing that it would remain anonymous and confidential, which was quite a big thing.

(14:32)

Jess, support services volunteer and staff, 2018 to present: Because it's incredibly powerful actually to to meet someone in that place and be there with them. And I think that's, you know, that's one of the most important things that we do is you meet someone in that distress and you just share it with them for a bit so they're not they don't have to be on their own in it for half an hour or however long they want to be with you for you know, that's just an incredibly powerful experience. So I think those kind of calls sort of stick with you. And it's not necessarily what was said necessarily, or what's going on for the person, like, sort of, in their lives necessarily is that that experiencing such raw emotion, I think in a way that you don't really experience in, in normal life, normal life, whatever that is, you know, with, yeah, the outside world, it doesn't. It's not something you see every day.

Liz, helpline volunteer, 2005 to 2009: The women that we receive phone calls from, we're mostly like, in a really sort of deep state of distress. It was a time where like, most of the services and the crisis teams and things weren't working. So I think for a lot of them, it was kind of us or Samaritans really, but because we specialise in self injury, you know, we picked up a lot of callers who, yeah, cutting for them was like a real issue. So yeah, it was really moving. And then we kind of like, have that have those phone calls, and then we go back,

and again, just have like a brief cup of tea, maybe a bit of a chat, you know, quick turnaround before we went in and took another call. So, I remember, like there being real, a real sense of camaraderie,

Stephanie, helpline volunteer, management committee, 1995 to 1998: It gave me a real sense of how you can be with someone one to one and how helpful that can be for that person to be heard. To be given the space and maybe to be given some, some tools as well.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2004-2006: In a similar way, if there was a difficult call, that either upset any of us as volunteers, there would be a lot of like flicking pens or like standing up from our really terrible, wobbly, office chairs, to try and catch the attention of another one. And if they were available, they'd come and sit next to you hold your hand and, and actually support the people that were supporting the callers. It's mad just thinking about it now actually because I haven't thought about it for a really long time, just how for how you need to flick a pen to catch someone's attention when they've got a headset on their back is too. Because it you know, as volunteers you're not trained professionals you're trained volunteers. And it's quite easy and common to feel completely out of your depth with some of these callers. Because they are so so unwell. Yeah, really sad.

Ellen: So you mentioned you had some, some training, what the training involve?

Jess, support services volunteer and staff, 2018 to present: The training was just the most amazing experience of my life. And I feel very fortunate because I get to deliver it now. And so the training, initially, it mainly revolves around the first sort of beginning bits, we're talking a lot about, what is self harm? And what we mean by that? What does it do for people what, you know, what are they getting out of it, as well as sort of learning how to listen to people in a way that you don't do in everyday life, it's learning how to really hear what somebody is saying, underneath their words.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2004-2006: Of all my jobs that I've had, volunteering or not, that BCSW of training was something else it really was so detailed and so, so thorough.

Jess, support services volunteer and staff, 2018 to present: Respect that you can, you can really hear someone without trying to give them advice and tell them what to do or ask them questions which they might not be ready for. And that can really shift the conversation.

Sal, collective member, volunteer, freelance trainer and staff, 1996 to 2021: We don't We never did. And back then we didn't do role plays, because you don't bring anything real if you pretending so it's always been about women on the training, speaking about their own experiences. So, you know, from the day for, you know, we did a whole day around sexual abuse of children. So, the topic might have been a time in my life and I felt powerless. And so what you end up with is a bunch of women, hopefully not listening too badly to each other but sometimes it's a bit clunky because we're all learning. But really the joy that was the beauty of it was is everybody sharing such personal deep kind of stuff.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2004-2006: It felt quite real. It really was a good experience. Yeah, I think the one of the first exercises I can think of that we did at the BCSW

training was that, we did some icebreaker exercises but then we were paired off from had some space to go and sit in our pairs and the exercise was just sit in silence and look at each other. It was horrific it really was. First, that was kind of just awkward silence. And then there was a bit of a giggle. And then just this really intense energy just descended over both my partner and I. And I think we were both bit shaken by it. Because I don't think either of us has ever been in a situation where we have had that level of attention or had to receive incoming energy in that way before.

(20:36)

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2005-2006: that there was a point in it where I was, I was still feeling very much thinking, what I do with my life, I didn't, I didn't use it to be I was supposed to do music therapy. I don't know what I'm doing. This isn't it at all. But they kept talking so much about the silence and making use of silence and listening to the silence. And there's a composer, John Cage, he famously has this piece of music, which is just silence, and it is 344, isn't it and it's the, the idea is that the sight, the noises that occur naturally are as valid as the music that any composer could write. And Cage wrote a lot about there being a sort of, again, triangular structure between the performer, the audience and the composer. So, because they had a setting in a triangle, I spent a lot of time thinking about John Cage and thinking about the silence and the breathing and the, you know, the sort of crying that doesn't quite make it out of throat that all those sort of little noises and that came properly alive when I started doing the helpline.

Sal, collective member, volunteer, freelance trainer and staff, 1996 to 2021: You anticipate some days being difficult, but the founder discussions about class just painful, triggering, and I was infuriated. Oh, yeah. Because it was it was a day it was a day. That's the whole point of it, you have to work out with volunteers, how they're going to handle when their stuff gets touched, because our stuff will always get touched, you can't listen. And it might not be you know, so that's why it's interesting to me that it was class that particularly got me because I wouldn't have expected it wouldn't have thought that it was going to be the thing that the button that pushed my buttons, you know, but it did. So what you need to do in training is have a sort of space that's hopefully safe enough, which is why all the interview process and all the rest of it and making sure that people are kind of in an okay enough position to be doing training. But so that they're so that they can, we can have feelings in that training group, we can see you know, what it feels like to have those buttons pressed, and still be okay to offer sports people,

Liz, helpline volunteer, 2005 to 2009: When I remember the actual work being very challenging, and I think I only sustained doing it because of the quality of the training and the level of the support that I received as a volunteer.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2004-2006: The other thing was that the pair support system. So, post shift would be paired up in advance with a peer supporter. So that would be another volunteer who was more experienced or maybe of the same level of experience. And we would have an hour to debrief the call following day. So that was all booked in advance ready. So if we'd had a bad shift, you know, that we'd have support the next day

and that model. I never saw that anywhere, anything like that. Not even close. But the value of that wouldn't have been able to volunteer there without that.

Liz, helpline volunteer, 2005 to 2009: So then that was like an hour on the phone to the absolutely incredible Sylvia Murray.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2005-2006: Sylvia was was wonderful. And this she would not remember me because I imagined there'd be hundreds of them, but I definitely remembered her. So she she just looked like it sounds so patronising, but she just looked like such a nice old lady in the training. And she and quite, you know, hands folded nicely on her skirt. And she'd be talking to us about this and this and I thought we were very nice. Like I instinctively know I'm not swearing in front of you.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2004-2006: She was so tough. She had this demeanour of this kind of gentle granny and essentially she was a little old lady. Stereotypical kind of white hair and little glasses and a soft voice. But I wouldn't pick a fight with her, no way. She was extraordinary. I've never met a woman like her before.

(24:37)

Liz, helpline volunteer, 2005 to 2009: So I just totally lucked out basically and had silver as my peer supporter. She was just like my, my sort of major saving grace really being able to download to her. And I still carry Sylvia and a lot of things that she said to me with me. That was kind of what helped me continue to work with the service for like a good few years really was just that the quality of the peer support that she offered was massive.

Sophie: What do you think is the biggest thing that you learned and you took from your whole experience? What was maybe the one thing that you, you think, okay, that's what stuck with me. And that's what's positive about this whole experience.

Stephanie, helpline volunteer, management committee, 1995 to 1998: I think it was, it was the, the care really was the best thing that we cared equally about ourselves on each other as we did, about the people who would call and anybody who who called would be cared for. There was never a sense of judgement or choosiness.

Anonymous, helpline volunteer, 2004-2006: That just the training thing was ever gonna have left, just solid training about importance of looking after yourself and looking after those around you. And not being shy to, to look really difficult stuff because it's okay to be distressed by it. Because to not be distressed by is actually not very normal at all. So doesn't sound like the best but no, that is the best because it's the most important things.

Sarah B, helpline volunteer, 2003 to 2008: Yeah, there are a couple of calls. Yeah, there are a few calls. Yes, there's that those that's what stays, and the wondering, what happened, how they are now. Yeah. Yeah, I'd, you know, I, I'd love to think that at some stage, I mean, obviously, I never, ever will. But you know, there's probably about probably about six or seven people that I would really like to know, there's one particular woman I'd really like to know how she is now. Because I really got, I sort of felt we had quite a personal bond. In fact, actually, she was my last call. And I don't know how she knew. But she said the end she

said, this is your last call, isn't it? I said yes. How did you know? She we just got to know each other. And somehow she picked that up she was really really bright. Really sensitive, and so damaged and totally aware of, of the damage and why and, and just trapped. And that was Yeah. I'd love to know how she is.

Anonymous, collective member, 1993 to 2000: Well, I said I'm writing to formally resigned from the line. Do you want to hear this letter? It's not very long. I also wanted to thank Hillary personally and all the women unpaid and paid who have been and are part of the project. The whole ethos of the training around non judgmental-ness equal opportunities and the learning understanding of abuse and self harm issues were exciting, challenging, and opened up for me new ways of being and thinking. On a personal level, it was my first step in starting to see a possible way forward in my own healing, and helped me to open stuck doors around my own feelings of shame and self blame, and begin to experiment in trusting others with my more vulnerable hidden parts. Most importantly, I had the privilege of gaining a deeper understanding of mental health issues. By listening to callers and receiving ongoing supervision and training within the organisation. This has led to me eventually making a career switch into mental health work rather than deadend and low interest jobs I've done most of my life I'm very clear about the extent of the positive impact the BCSW has had on my life in so many ways. Best wishes triple BCSW and long may continue to do the extraordinary work it does.

Liz, helpline volunteer, 2005 to 2009: I just think it was great. It was it was it was such as it was it was really good thing to be a part of because it it felt good and it still feels good that that I did that and that I could hear those stories you know, it's had it had a personal gain for me because you know, it did turn me towards the direction that I you know, care about very much very interested in, but it was it was a really, it was just so gentle. It was just such a gentle kind thing to do.

Jess, support services volunteer and staff, 2018 to present: I think it changed my life completely honestly, it's really hard to explain but I think I... I just learned so much about myself, I felt for the first time... I used to be quite a closed off emotional person, but like emotionally, I didn't really share a lot with people I can, and I just don't think I would have been able to do that still, if I wasn't here if it wasn't being in a place where emotions are accepted and understood where self injury is accepted and understood where, you know, women's experiences are accepted and understood. I think it's, it's, it's really transformative. Working at a place volunteering at a place working at a place like that. And yeah, I just I just learned so much about how to talk to people and how to be comfortable talking to people and how to look at really difficult things. You know, I used to hate picking up the phone. Now, I don't think like anything nothing on the end of the phone that could ever scare me, ever. There's nothing scary at the end of the phone anymore *laughter*.

(31:10)

End credits

This podcast was produced as part of women listening to women, and all history at the Bristol crisis service for women produced and edited by Marnie Woodmeade. Music by

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You can find the full interviews with transcripts on the www.womenlisteningtowomen.org.uk, to hear more of the voices from the Bristol Crisis Service for Women.