

The Power of Lived Experience and Peer Support



A report by Self-Harm Network Scotland.



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Introduction

People's experiences are at the centre of everything we do at Penumbra. The power of people's lived experience enables us to provide pioneering services which transform lives. Self-Harm Network Scotland (SHNS) is no different. Established in 2022 to support the delivery of the Scottish Government and COSLA's Self Harm Strategy and Action Plan¹, the creation of our national service was underpinned by a shared goal of putting people's experiences of self-harm and recovery at the centre of what we do.

These experiences have supported us to develop and deliver the service, and our Self-Harm Awareness training/resources. We have worked with a variety of partners and people across the country to share learning and inform what we do. It is thanks to these people, and their personal experiences, that SHNS has achieved what it has, delivering resources, training and support, and creating meaningful change across Scotland².

Key Messages

In this report we will explore how SHNS ensures that personal experiences shape every aspect of service design and delivery, and the positive impact this has had on the outcomes of this service. Through our peer-led approach, SHNS has created a supportive environment that fosters meaningful, evident change for people who self-harm, their loved ones, and professionals working with them.

Our peer workforce, each drawing on their unique recovery journey, form compassionate and purposeful relationships with those they support, providing safe, hopeful spaces where individuals can explore their feelings and behaviours. These shared experiences, along with the presence of peer workers as evidence of recovery, enable different kinds of conversations that inspire and motivate people to explore new approaches and understand their personal recovery. The service continues to grow, driven by the invaluable contribution of lived experience, to create more spaces of hope, kindness, and respect for people across Scotland who are affected by self-harm.

We have prioritised the inclusion of lived experience in multiple other ways to ensure our offerings are accessible, supportive and effective. By involving people with lived experience in co-production from the start, we shape services and resources that are relevant to the needs of the people we support. We also integrate these voices in our training and continue to reflect and adapt this to ensure our training is evolving and remaining effective. Our investment in lived experience, and peer support has created an environment grounded in authenticity and has had a profound impact on the work we've done.

1. [Self-Harm Strategy and Action Plan 2023 to 2027 - gov.scot](https://gov.scot/self-harm-strategy-and-action-plan-2023-to-2027)

2. [Find out more about our work in our Impact Report for 2023-24](#)

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1. Who are Self-Harm Network Scotland?

SHNS provides compassionate support, resources, and information about self-harm. We also provide support and information to friends, families and professionals.

Our team of Peer Practitioners offer remote support to anyone 12+ in Scotland. This is done through 12-15 one-hour sessions of recovery-focused, person-centred support. Our support can be delivered over the phone, through video call or text. The Network has previously had locality services offering this support in the Highlands, Dundee and Glasgow.

We also have [a website](#) which has a variety of recovery-focused support, tools, and information that anyone can access to enable people to support themselves and others. Our website also houses a live chat service, which can be accessed by anyone in Scotland that is 12 years old or over.

Additionally, we develop and deliver Self-Harm Awareness training for individuals and organisations. That's because we are passionate about raising awareness and reducing stigma around self-harm.

Our Live Chat service is available from 6pm-10pm, 7 days a week for people who are at the point of self-harming or thinking about self-harming. It was developed in response to a recognised need for immediate support outside of standard hours for people experiencing distress. Our live chat team includes Peer Practitioners and trained volunteers. One of our volunteers recently spoke about their experiences of providing support on the Live Chat for STV news: [Volunteer Experience](#)

2. Designing Our Services

Penumbra has been providing support to people who self-harm for over 25 years. With support from colleagues in Penumbra's existing local self-harm services, we harnessed their collective experience and learning to inform the design of the SHNS.

In 2022, during the 'design phase', we also took guidance from lived experience groups, including The Scottish Government's Self-Harm Strategy Design Group³, [Scottish Recovery Network events](#), and our internal reference group.

Penumbra understands the need to continually improve the services and support they provide and continue to reflect and gather feedback from external partners, and people who access our service.

3. Further information and a Q&A with Chloe and Sioned from the Self-Harm Strategy Design Group (January 2023): <https://tfn.scot/opinion/lived-experience-is-shaping-scotlands-upcoming-self-harm-strategy>.

4. Penumbra's internal reference group consisted of Peer Practitioners and supported people from Penumbra's existing self-harm services.

How people's lived experiences helped to shape our website

From the outset, people with lived experience were involved in shaping Self-Harm Network Scotland's website. Regular meetings with the above-mentioned groups ensured that the SHNS website reflected the needs and wants of people with lived experience through the unique insights and experiences they shared.

The SHNS website⁵ was launched in early 2023.

3. Peer Support

What is peer support?

Peer support is when people with similar lived experiences connect with and support each other. SHNS's Peer Practitioners all have their own, unique, lived experience of self-harm, and have been on their own recovery journey which they can draw on to support people in our services. Peer Practitioners have been trained to support others experiencing similar issues, to assist their recovery. Things can and do get better and our Peer Practitioners offer hope and demonstrate that recovery is possible.

From the initial contact with the service, people accessing our support will be in a safe environment with a Peer Practitioner and talking with someone who 'gets it'. The power of lived experience enables us to work with each person to find their own way forward. Everyone's journey is different, so we work with each person to identify, believe in, and reach their goals, whatever they may be.

SHNS embeds lived experience in the delivery of everything we do by having a peer workforce. This means that our service and training is delivered by people who have been trained to use their lived experience intentionally to support others on their recovery journey. To find out more about what peer support means to our team, watch this '[In Conversation](#)' video: [In Conversation - Peer Support](#)

You can read more about peer support over on Scottish Recovery Network's website: [What is peer support? - Scottish Recovery Network](#)

⁵[Home - Self-Harm Network Scotland Penumbra \(selfharmnetworkscotland.org.uk\)](https://www.selfharmnetworkscotland.org.uk/)

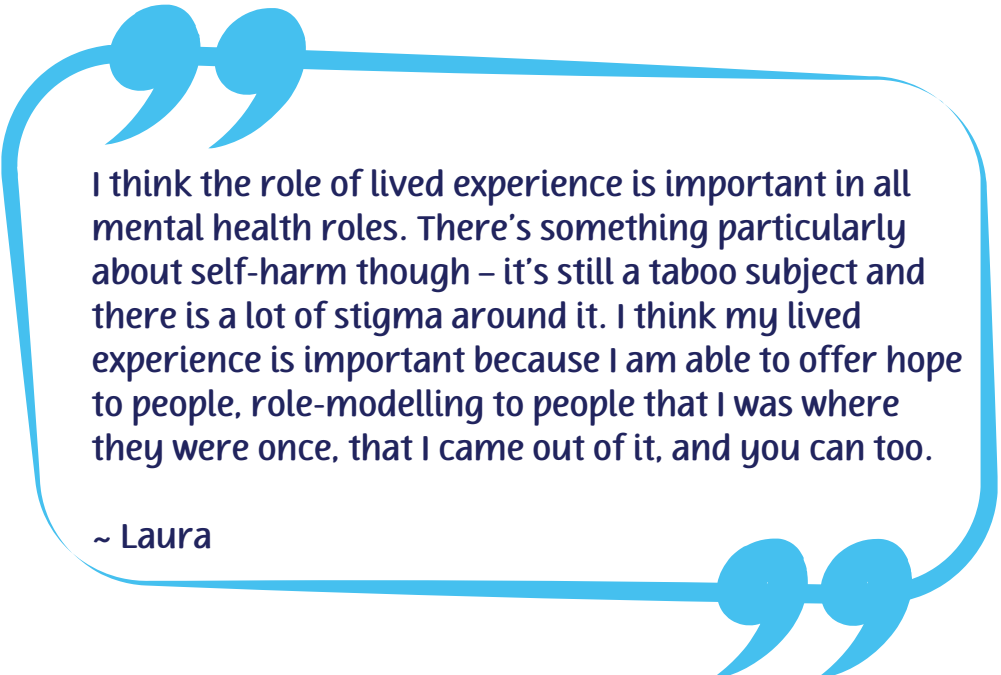
4. Get to know our Peer Practitioners



Having lived experience of self-harm means our Peer Practitioners are able to establish strong, meaningful connections with the people they are supporting. Laura and Cha, two of our Peer Practitioners, highlighted the importance of their lived experience to those they support, how their lived experience enhances the support they provide, and how it can give hope to supported people by demonstrating the positive change that can be achieved:


It helps them [supported people] to worry less about being judged negatively for their self-harm. I often also hear a sense of relief from people I am supporting that someone else 'gets it' – it's a normalising of experiences that they previously felt they were alone in having. There is also an element of hope in seeing that people can and do overcome these difficult things.

~ Laura



I think the role of lived experience is important in all mental health roles. There's something particularly about self-harm though – it's still a taboo subject and there is a lot of stigma around it. I think my lived experience is important because I am able to offer hope to people, role-modelling to people that I was where they were once, that I came out of it, and you can too.

~ Laura



Having lived experience of self-harm is a very niche skill set to have. I feel I am in a state of constant recovery and being a Peer Practitioner makes me feel adequate and makes me feel like I am enough. My role takes connection and compassion into consideration, and it makes me feel really helpful.

~ Cha

Laura and Cha also spoke about the value and benefits of working within a team of practitioners who have lived experience of self-harm, and how lived experience enables them to build meaningful connections with colleagues:

It means I am more able to feel vulnerable with colleagues. We're good at having each other's backs. Although we all have lived experience of self-harm, we don't have the same experience. Being able to collectively use your lived experience is powerful.

~ Laura

We've all gone through different things, and we feel safe in our team. Sure, the usual workplace stresses can get to us, but we accept one another for who we are. I know that if I'm having a bad day, I can talk to anyone in the team.

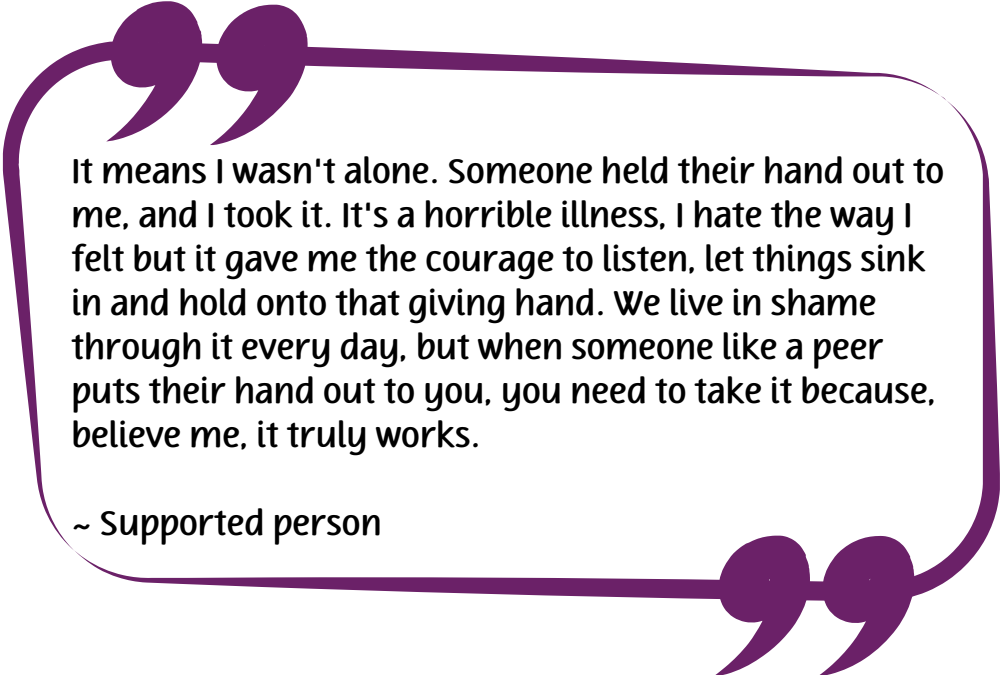
~ Cha

5. Insights from our Supported People

People who have received support from our Peer Practitioners shared their reflections on what it means to be supported by someone with lived experience of self-harm.


Removing the sense of being isolated in their experiences, and having someone alongside you providing person-centred help, encouragement and support was highlighted:



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It means I wasn't alone. Someone held their hand out to me, and I took it. It's a horrible illness, I hate the way I felt but it gave me the courage to listen, let things sink in and hold onto that giving hand. We live in shame through it every day, but when someone like a peer puts their hand out to you, you need to take it because, believe me, it truly works.


~ Supported person

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One of the best parts of the whole service was having someone with lived experience like Kerri by my side. Kerri was able to meet me where I was and help me feel like I wasn't alone in what I was experiencing. I never felt judged.

~ Supported person


Another person spoke about the importance of receiving non-judgemental support from someone who truly understands, and who can show that recovery is possible:



It has meant a great deal to me to be working with someone with 'lived experience'. In my case, I felt that my peer support worker genuinely understood what I was going through and it was brilliant to finally speak to someone who 'gets it'. I never felt embarrassed talking to her because I knew she recognised what I was going through as a genuine problem rather than a reflection of myself or my character. I no longer felt alone with this problem. She has found recovery and now I had an opportunity to do the same with her help.

~ Supported person

Two supported people emphasised the importance of recognising the progress they had made, while reflecting on the positive changes they have managed to make through their work with their Peer Practitioner:



I think I had a total of 15 sessions with Kerri, and we did face some setbacks along the way due to personal things going on in my life. But Kerri was amazing at bringing me back and helping me realise just how far I had come...

Overall, the whole process has changed me in how I deal with those feelings of self-harm when they arise, and the confidence in myself to know that I can deal with them.

~ Supported person

You might not see the little glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel at first as the constant darkness is where we live but when you do reach that wee bit of light you will know it for sure, and you will keep going. You have helped me so much. I know how to listen not only to my peer for support, but I can accept what they showed me and how to listen to my true self.

~ Supported person

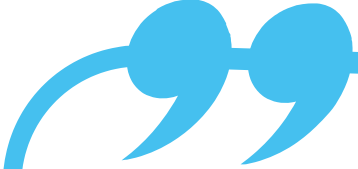
6. Insights from our Volunteers



Natalie and Julia, two of our volunteers who have lived experience of self-harm shared insights into what it feels like to use their lived experience in their roles. They also spoke about their experiences of volunteering on the live chat, and how their lived experience informs the support they provide.




Demonstrating empathy and having emotional resilience was seen as important factors in providing effective support without impacting on a volunteer's own recovery. Being able to draw on lived experience of and using it for the benefit of others was reported to give purpose to what are considered negative experiences:



I feel mostly empathy for everyone going through a hard time. I don't feel triggered by their experiences in a sense that it would impact my own mental health. During my interview I remember being asked about ways I would look after myself if I felt distressed about the chats, so I believe the volunteers have the emotional strength to deal with these topics. I do sometimes worry about some of the people I have talked to, but I don't feel like it has regressed my recovery in any way.

~ Julia




Using my lived experience for me feels like I have been able to use some of my worst times to hopefully support others. It's not that those times were 'worth' it but that is what life is, lots of experiences, good and bad, and I am glad to have a purpose for the not-so-great ones.

~ Natalie




Natalie reflected on the peer support she accessed during her own recovery, and the difficulties and challenges faced when engaging with 'professionals':




When going through a lot of mental health stuff you can feel really alone and very overwhelmed. I was lucky to have informal peer support from friends that I met during my recovery, most of whom are still friends now, and while sometimes it isn't the most beneficial to have friends in the same boat, as it were, it was good to feel less alone.

I would have loved to have peer support during my time recovering from self-harm. A lot of professionals made me feel like an alien who was not manageable, and they would take extreme measures sometimes and then shrugged it off other times. There was no common ground, and I felt like it was them versus me and it made me feel worse about the situation, so I can't be any prouder to use what I have learned that worked for me during that time and now I hope I can be the listening ear for others that I needed back then. It feels empowering to finally be able to use what I know in such a positive way for others. ~ Natalie




Natalie and Julia described aspects that contributed to a positive experience of volunteering, while also acknowledging the challenging aspects as well:



The webchat is great, and the users have said to me that they prefer it to calling somewhere. They appreciate the anonymity of the webchat a lot. A lot of young people feel anxiety about making phone calls. For me, I find it easier to think about what I want to say whilst typing.

~ Julia




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Using the webchat has been great, in the sense that I am pleased so many people are reaching out to chat about self-harm. I find it hard sometimes when some of the same stories are being told such as lack of community support, but I am so glad that people are finding us and while we aren't going to make it suddenly okay for them, I do hope we are a place that can provide some kindness and listen to their stories, which for me is the best bit.

~ Natalie

Natalie and Julia reflected on their ability to connect with and understand supported people through their lived experience. It also enables them to walk alongside the person knowing when to listen and when to offer suggestions and advice:

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I don't always say that I am using my own experience to the person I am supporting because it is not face to face and it is harder to gauge reactions, but sometimes I have put out there what I have found beneficial and it has been received positively most of the time, and I really find that helpful to reflect on afterwards. You are not there to change lives, but to be there to offer things that might not have been tried, or to help someone re-try things they have done before.

~ Natalie

It makes it easier to relate to the people reaching out to chat. I have shared tips that have helped me on my recovery journey, and I feel that I can easily pick up when someone needs to be heard most of all, rather than them listening to advice.

~ Julia

Sometimes, it's about having someone there to do grounding with or go over something they already know. In my own recovery, that is what I found helped propel me on a better path, to not do everything alone, and I hope that I can offer the same to others.

~ Natalie

7. Our Impact So Far

There is still much to do to ensure that people in Scotland affected by self-harm receive compassionate, person-centred support, resources and information to help them. However, it is vital to recognise and acknowledge the critical contribution of lived experience in enabling the progress and success of SHNS to date.

Supporting people who self-harm

People who self-harm or are thinking of self-harming have received compassionate and meaningful support from our team of Peer Practitioners and volunteers. Some of the supported people have described the support they have received as “life changing.”



"I can honestly say that the peer practitioner has changed my life and that I wouldn't still be here without her help...I think the work that you do is invaluable and hope one day to be able to help others in the way that you have helped me."

"You've brought some blue sky into my life again when all I saw at the beginning was black clouds. I will always remember how much of an impact you have made to my life."



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Some snippets from people supported by Self-Harm Network Scotland, Impact Report 2023-2024.

87% of people supported reported that they stopped or reduced self-harming and found other ways to cope, following support from SHNS (SHNS Impact Report 23/24).

71% of people who gave end-of-service feedback rated the support they received 10 out of 10. In its first year, the SHNS team has had over 1,300 supportive conversations on our Live Chat.

90% of people who gave feedback after using the webchat said they found it helpful (71% 'Very Helpful', 19% 'Somewhat Helpful').



"Very patient and convinced me to try the local self-harm services."

"No pressure was put on me regarding my coping techniques. Very good listening."

"[The chat] was so lovely and very logical and helped me into a safe and calmer location."



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Feedback from some of the people supported by Self-Harm Network Scotland's Live Chat in the past year.

This demonstrates that our peer-led approach works. It has enabled us to provide spaces that are safe and hopeful where people feel understood and gain insight to their feelings and behaviours. We build a compassionate and purposeful relationship where people can explore what will work for them and be supported to try out new coping strategies.

Supporting others



By working with other professionals who may be supporting people who self-harm, we have deepened understanding of self-harm across Scotland, with over 3,000 professionals in Scotland having received our training. We continue to use our learning from lived experience and supporting people to develop our training and share our understanding with professionals across Scotland. This approach works, and is reflected in our feedback:

- Of professionals who provided feedback about the Self-Harm Awareness training, 98% agreed that they had a better understanding of self-harm as a coping strategy, and 99% agreed that the trainer created a supportive environment for participants to share their experiences.

Self-Harm Network Scotland's training has made me feel a lot more confident in my knowledge of self-harm and how to support people with it.

~ Feedback from someone who took part in our Self-Harm Awareness training

We understood from our learning that people who self-harm also seek support from their loved ones. We wanted to share what we've learnt about providing hopeful and compassionate support with those around people who self-harm.

Since January 2024, our Peer Practitioners have made 25 1:1 calls to loved ones who are worried about someone who self-harms. These calls give loved ones an opportunity to speak with someone who has lived experience of self-harm and gives them the chance to figure out how they can support the person who is self-harming.

We've also supported 47 loved ones through our Loved Ones support groups, which are available to anyone in Scotland who is supporting a loved one with their self-harm, and would like to learn more about self-harm and how to support a loved one.

It is important to emphasise that Self-Harm Network Scotland would not exist, nor have achieved the impact it has to date, without the involvement of and contribution from people who have lived experience of self-harm.

8. Recovery Stories

People often share their lived experience journeys with us, and supporting people to share their journeys will always be an empowering part of our work in promoting positive and hope-filled messages around mental health. Sharing is a powerful experience and can be an important part of the recovery journey for the person sharing, while also inspiring hope for the reader that recovery is possible.



“Getting support from a Peer Practitioner, somebody who has lived experience of self-harm, has meant a lot.

Kayleigh understood that I wasn't self-harming for attention. She didn't judge me and the listening and talking helped me a lot. She was absolutely fantastic. I can't praise her enough.”

~ Snippet from 'Tracy's Story'. [You can read the full story over on our website.](#)

Hear more from some of our supported people who have shared their recovery stories here: [Recovery Stories](#)

9. What's Next?

Self-Harm Network Scotland has demonstrated the transformative power of lived experience in shaping and delivering services that offer hopeful, compassionate, person-centred support to people affected by self-harm. Since inception we have built on the voices of people who have experienced self-harm and recovery. These valuable contributions have shaped the development of our resources, our Self-Harm Awareness training, the design of our website and Live Chat – ensuring our network meets the needs of the people we aim to support.

To sustain and expand our impact while collaborating with COSLA and the Scottish Government on the delivery of the self-harm strategy and action plan, we will continue advocating for the integration of lived experience. Our efforts will focus on broadening accessibility by reaching underserved communities across Scotland. Additionally, we will enhance our digital tools, resources, and training to ensure flexible and equitable support. We will also continue supporting our Peer Practitioner team, enabling them to deliver the exceptional peer support they have been providing through ongoing development, awareness-raising, and advocacy for their work.

Regular feedback and impact evaluations will guide our continuous improvement, ensuring our services remain person-centred and effective. By championing lived experience and building on its successes, SHNS aims to foster meaningful change and provide hope, kindness and respect to more people affected by self-harm across Scotland.



Get in touch

If you have any questions, or need this information in a different format, please contact us:

- Email us: SHNS@penumbra.org.uk
- Check out our website: SHNS@penumbra.org.uk
- Visit our website for a range of recovery-focused support, tools, and information about self-harm, which anyone can access to enable people to support themselves and others: selfharmnetworkscotland.org.uk
- If you need to speak with someone, you can access our Live Chat over on our website, between 6pm - 10pm, 7 days a week.
- Find us on social media:

Twitter/ X: [@SHNScotland](https://twitter.com/SHNScotland)

Facebook: [Self-Harm Network Scotland](https://www.facebook.com/Self-Harm-Network-Scotland)

Bluesky: [@shnscotland.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/shnscotland.bsky.social)

