Put on your oxygen mask before helping others: mental well-being in service design

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Abstract

This paper describes the lessons learned from Service Design projects which have tackled sensitive subjects: from young people in care, mental health, unemployment, homelessness, overcrowding, crisis and domestic violence to name but a few. It highlights the importance of adapting normal project practice to protect the mental health and well-being of all those involved in a project. It argues that project rituals must be developed to look after the participants, which requires a shift in company' cultures to truly value mental health and well-being and to reduce staff stress and trauma.

KEYWORDS: mental health, mental well-being, service design, research, sensitive subjects

Introduction

As Service Designers, we accumulate, manipulate and disseminate a wealth of knowledge, skills and techniques in our quest to convert complexity into clarity. We research, design, prototype, test, and implement myriad innovative solutions destined to improve the lives of others.

At the core of this work is an ability to understand people, work out how best we can address their known needs, as well as how we address the needs that they do not yet know they have. This basic tenet of our work – making people's lives easier – is a guiding principle which we do not always apply to our own practices.

In our eagerness to understand others, we can sometimes neglect to understand and appreciate ourselves, rarely exploring the ways in which we can improve our own lives, both professionally and in more general terms. Too often we fail to apply our design approaches to our own work practices and processes and so, as our clients and end users appreciate the end results, our own house can be left in relative disarray.

One of the most fundamental of areas that we should not overlook is our mental health and well-being: not specifically the overtime or amount of travel involved in our work – though that no doubt takes its toll. We are considering here those projects that tackle the toughest subjects, those which perhaps require us to give a part of ourselves that might otherwise have stayed hidden, or those where we must relate to a participant's - and perhaps our own - traumatic experiences.

"As a service designer, I need to know how to work with a suitable amount of empathy yet a balanced amount of detachment so that I can look after my team and myself during difficult projects."

Research interviews and workshops resonate with us in a variety of ways, and are often straightforward. However some may lead to serious and problematic conversations which tackle sensitive subjects head on. Discussions of this nature can have a profound effect on both researchers and participants, some triggering deeply felt emotions whether on a compassionate level or on a personal level of recognition through shared experience.

These triggers affect each of us in different ways and in different situations. We might experience emotions inappropriate to the context of an interview. We might become angry or sad and our mind may wander. We might become stressed and struggle to comprehend what we have heard. We might even suffer flashbacks based on our own intensely personal experiences.

The themes that we encounter which strike a chord or hit a nerve can be difficult to deal with at the best of times, more so whilst on a professional footing with a relative stranger present. We soldier on in the face of difficult issues, braving the situation in the name of 'professionalism'. However it is important to take a step back and reevaluate these situations where we are faced with sensitive emotional issues.

The associated feelings that can be generated from such issues should not be ignored. No matter how important the task, it must not come at the cost of our own mental health – or that of somebody else. When we become affected, our concentration lapses and we become distanced to those around us – colleagues or participants – as well as to ourselves. We become unavailable and unable to properly interact.

If we are to be in a position to support others, we need to first be capable of looking after ourselves. This may not always be instinctive or intuitive, so we need to prepare ourselves for these potentially difficult moments. There are a variety of techniques that we can add to our skillset to help us deal with well-being issues, methods which can help ground us before we respond in tough situations. These techniques may be as simple as taking a few minutes to breathe, or they may involve bringing in professional counsellors.

For employers, the cost of doing nothing is staggering: mental health problems in the UK workforce cost employers almost £35 billion last year, £10.6 billion in sickness absence; £21.2 billion in reduced productivity at work, or 'presenteeism' and £3.1 billion in replacing staff who leave their jobs because of their mental health. (Parsonage and Saini 2017)

1. Consider your whole project approach

Looking after our participants' well-being is only one aspect - arguably the most important one - of managing well-being within a project. We must also consider the whole project from the bottom up.

"As a project manager, I need some guidance to plan projects on sensitive topics so we can achieve good outcomes for our client, their users and our people."

No project management training and very little design training prepares us for researching and designing technology to help tackle issues such as domestic abuse. We need to turn to other disciplines such as social research and psychology for guidance.

Establish a risk strategy for each project.

There are a variety of approaches in preparing for a project that can reduce the likelihood of risks occurring and mitigate their impact on staff. The British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice (2017) states that, *"Social researchers face a range of potential risks to their safety. Safety issues need to be considered in the design and conduct of social research projects and procedures should be adopted to reduce the risk to researchers, including, importantly, any research assistants employed."*

Bring in the experts.

As Service Designers it is rare that we find ourselves experts in a particular field and, particularly where issues of a sensitive nature are concerned, it is essential to bring in organisations with in-depth knowledge and experience in that area. By working closely together at the early stages of a project, we can shape the approach, the designs, the language, making sure that the proper safeguards are in place for participants and designers alike.

The Aye Mind Project explored digital approaches for mental well-being with young people. It was funded by CHEST (Collective enHanced Environment for Social Tasks) and led by a consortium with Snook, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (NHSGGC), Young Scot and the Mental Health Foundation. The project then assembled a collaborative of 20+ local organisations to provide guidance and help with dissemination. The NHSGGC team made sure that everyone who worked on the project attended a Mental Health First Aid training course, even staff who didn't come in contact with young people. We have kept that practice up ever since, including for interns and contractors.

During the Tech vs Abuse project with Comic Relief, Snook partnered with Chayn, a collaborative that leverages technology to empower women against violence and oppression, and Safelives, a domestic violence advocacy and support organisation. This gave us access to advice and support from experts in the field.

Work with intermediaries.

Relevant community groups, support workers, and charities are more likely to understand the people that we are trying to reach, and will be able to guide the recruitment of participants. Even more importantly, they will be able to support participants before, during and after interactions. By reaching out in this way we can be confident that participants have access to the support that they might need, allowing us the peace of mind to focus on the project and what it is trying to achieve.

As an example, the Aye Mind project reached out to a wider collaboration of agencies and partnered with Y-Sort It, See Me and GAMH for the co-design workshops with young people. A staff member from each organisation supported their young people during the workshop.

Work with your team.

With heavy workloads it can be all too easy to plan our projects in isolation, landing the project plan on a colleague's desk as a fait accompli. However, this is a false economy and,

by bringing a project to the team's attention at the very earliest emergence of the brief, we give colleagues the chance to bring their own experience to the table, their own connections with the community.

Assign projects carefully.

It is important to consider carefully the suitability of individuals within our potential team for a particular project. A discussion about the project with possible candidates before assigning a role may well reveal strong reasons for both inclusion and exclusion. It might be that while a suitable looking candidate has experience of certain issues relevant to a project, the subject matter might be one that resonates too strongly within them, putting them in a difficult and possibly harmful situation. We should always bear in mind that something that is not of a sensitive nature for one person, may very well be a trigger for someone else. We all bring our different histories to our work, and we cannot presuppose what is an issue for one and not an issue for another. Where these issues are concerned, time needs to be allowed for colleagues to consider their feelings about possible involvement, and respect given where they decline involvement. Staff should be clear that any discussions of a sensitive nature are shared in complete confidence. Should a situation arise where it might be important to share information, we must do so only with the individual's express permission.

Set boundaries.

It is important to clarify the boundaries of what can be expected of a project, what can be expected of us - by others as well as by ourselves - when dealing with those in extreme need or those suffering from a traumatic experience. When we find ourselves emotionally engaged and invested in somebody's story, the need to 'give as much as you can' can be strong. We feel frustration at our inability to facilitate change in an individual's circumstances, or the sense of responsibility in representing their voice in a wider context might be overwhelming. Boundaries provide a baseline, and being aware of these beforehand allows for warning bells to ring before it is too late. The level of engagement should always be an individual's choice, and it should be pointed out that sharing more does not necessarily make for a better job - in some cases it might actually prove counter-productive.

Reduce the pace.

Projects touching on sensitive issues require a greater amount of time than those of a more routine nature. Allowing for more frequent breaks gives both researcher and participant time to recover and revitalise. Pairing colleagues up so that they can offer each other support or allow them to excuse themselves from an interview or workshop should they feel the need can be useful. A two-person approach can also be useful where an interviewee is in full flow and continuity can be maintained. Planning a slower paced project is important so that more time is taken to think, take stock of, and reflect upon important and difficult issues, resulting in carefully considered outcomes.

Design your internal support.

For all sensitive projects, we now designate a staff member, within or outwith the project team, to act as support, as a trusted friend, a sort of 'supervisor'. Therapists have a supervisor who helps them work through what they hear and looks after them to make sure that they don't take their clients' issues onto themselves. Staff know that they can call their supporter anytime when they're struggling. When internal support isn't enough, we have put in place professional support to help create that culture where mental health is equally important to physical health.

2. Look after your participants

Making sure that research and design participants are well looked-after is a familiar part of a Service Designers' work. Research frameworks, information letters, consent forms, risk assessments (physical), and appropriate reward vouchers display a degree of thought and regard for participants. But the truth is that the duty of care goes a great deal farther than this.

As designers of future services, we aim to meet the needs of those who will be using a new, yet to be implemented service, or an existing service in a future state. Whilst the new or evolved service is the ultimate goal of our work, we cannot put the needs of future users above those with whom we deal in the present: the well-being of participants in research or design sessions cannot be at the expense of the future design.

This doesn't mean that we should shy away from difficult conversations and difficult topics. On the contrary, with a little forethought, we can equip ourselves to support participants, researchers and designers equally, allowing us to tackle the toughest of topics in a considered and considerate way, achieving valuable insights in the process.

Give before you take.

Before engaging with participants, consider: what's in it for them? What will a participant gain from taking part? Can we give before we take? Can we design our research in such a way that we can offer something to the participant before asking them for their contribution to the research?

Snook have run The Matter project twice to engage young people first around sexual health, then around alcohol consumption. In exchange for sharing their views on sexual health or alcohol, young people learn to design, create and publish their own newspaper. They present their opinions and their work at the event launch. Here is an excerpt from the invitation to take part:
"The best thing is that you don't need any previous skills to get involved and all of the activities are supported by staff from The Matter. Your participation will be recognised – we will support you through a form of accreditation that suits you, like a Youth Achievement or a Saltire Award."

The skill and knowledge exchange places the designers and the participants on an equal footing, unlike difficult situations where the disparity of power is often at play.

Consider end-to-end support.

We need to think carefully about participants' experiences before and after the research or the workshop. By working with community groups, social workers and networks that are familiar to participants, we can make sure they are fully supported during and after the interaction with them.

Given what our project partners know about the participants and their experiences, how might we best present the invitation to participate? What support might they need to be able to take part? If they need to discuss something afterwards, who do they turn to? The project should make it clear to partners and participants how the support will work.

Snook worked with Renfrewshire Council to explore what customers needed to access digital services. We worked with STAR, a local community centre. After carefully checking whether we could be trusted to be given access to their participants, they introduced the project a few days beforehand to give themselves time to reassure the most nervous attendees. They scheduled the order of interviews so that relatives could come together. The STAR manager, upon hearing for a young woman's story invited her to come back the next day so that they

could work out ways she could access support for her situation. The continuity was crucial to the well-being of vulnerable participants, to the researchers, and to the research itself.

Re-telling stories can be traumatic.

We are usually more comfortable sharing difficult stories with our nearest and dearest, so it's important to consider the effect of asking participants to recall experiences and recount them to a stranger. Recollection in itself can be traumatic, so we try to introduce ways to help participants put some distance between their stories and the present. Personas, storytelling, and using design games are ways we can help participants put distance between their own stories and the discussion.

The Co-designing Care project researched and co-designed digital innovations with young people in care. The team designed an interactive activity based on the popular game of the time, Crossy Road, designed to capture the young people's journey through care and their lived experiences. Young people were asked to consider phases of their lives and tell us the bad and good elements of these experiences through the use of collage. It was made clear to the young people that they did not have to disclose anything they were not comfortable with. They could also complete the activity based on a typical journey of a looked after young person.

It is worth bearing in mind that triggers can surface at any time in both ourselves and our participants – even when the research is not necessarily directly related to those lived experiences. Be alert to a person's body language and the replies that indicate a boundary which they are not prepared to explore and move on with the interview.

Design every aspect of the interaction.

While we would generally visit interviewees in their home or place of work to do contextual interviews, there can be times where that is either not possible or indeed not preferable or appropriate. On these occasions, it is important to ensure that the space we're inviting people into is suitable for the situation.

In the case of a workshop with women victims and survivors of domestic abuse for the Tech vs Abuse project, the presence of an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) at the session was an important asset, as was a chill out area with soft furniture – for mingling, eating or just for a small measure of sanctuary. Something as simple as offering a hot drink can markedly benefit rapport, more so if such a simple experience is shared between researcher and participant outwith the confines of an interview.

During the Aye Mind co-designing workshop, Snook made a mistake: having checked what we thought was every aspect of the workshop with our project partners, we later found that the menu for the buffet had been neglected, resulting in a number of workshop participants feeling excluded. Catering for those with special dietary needs or eating disorders is now part of every project plan.

3. Consider all your project rituals with a mental well-being lense

After adapting the project to the sensitive nature of the topic and designing the project to look after the well-being of our participants, it is important to embed mental well-being in all of the project rituals. Just as there are agile project ceremonies, standups and retrospectives, we need to incorporate well-being rituals.

"As a team member, I need to know how to leave behind what I have heard so that I can return to my personal life."

Sleep matters.

"Sleeping poorly increases the risk of having poor mental health. In the same way that healthy diet and exercise can help to improve our mental health, so can sleep."
(Espie 2011)

For project managers, this might mean arranging for teams to travel the day before a workshop in order to get enough sleep, even planning for the risk of delays, so that researchers and facilitators can truly be focused on their participants.

Debriefing rituals matter.

The importance of debriefing sessions cannot be underestimated and these sessions should be held during or immediately after each research sprint. Identifying and discussing issues that team members have experienced can help to mitigate some of the effects of those issues that have stayed with them. Regularly asking colleagues how they are feeling can provide an opportunity to shed some of the load and, likewise, when offered the same opportunity ourselves, it matters that we take the chance to breathe and really ask ourselves how we are feeling. It is, of course, very easy to tell one another that we are 'fine', and even harder to tell colleagues the whole truth, however it is worth practising. While it is tempting to drop debriefing sessions when the project is behind schedule or when the themes to discuss are particularly hard, it is exactly on occasions such as these that debriefs are most critical and most effective.

Learn 5 techniques for self-care.

The following simple techniques are aimed at helping us to relax and keep ourselves grounded in the aftermath of difficult and distressing experiences. Some of these rituals can work within the team context whilst others may work best for an individual. Although some may at first feel unnatural and take us out of our comfort zone, in the long run they can be extremely helpful and, sooner or later, will seem like second nature. Always bear in mind that we are all different and a technique that works for one person might not be useful for another.

1. Breathe

Breathing is the cornerstone of self-care. Gradually extend your exhalation so that it becomes longer, then inhale. You can imagine that you are breathing slowly in and out through a straw. Some people like to exhale through the mouth, like a sigh. Just be aware of the air coming in and out, either by placing your hand on your abdomen or by paying attention to where on your body you can track the sensations of breathing. Find your own way to do as much of this as you feel comfortable doing – there's no need to make yourself feel self-conscious. A few moments of awareness can make all the difference. Extending your exhalation sends a calming down message to your nervous system and can make a huge difference. Don't worry about the in breath, it will take care of itself.

2. Feel your feet on the ground

If you're sitting down, feel the chair under your bottom, the back of the seat supporting your back. Keep breathing out slowly.

3. Pay attention to your environment

If you're on the train heading home, can you feel the wobble of the train? What can you hear around you? What else can you notice around you? Can you feel wind on your face? Keep breathing out slowly.

4. Shake it off

Animals who have escaped a danger tremble to release the adrenaline. Shake your hands, your arms, your legs, your head, as if you were trying to flick something off. Return to breathing out slowly.

5. Brush it off

Brush your shoulders as if you were brushing some dust of your shoulder pads. You're letting the stories fall off your shoulders. Think of the expression: *"you've got too much on your shoulders"*, or, *"to have a monkey on your back"*. Well, flick them away. You can do the same thing on your back.

4. Establish a culture that values well-being

"As a manager, I need to establish a culture where it's OK to ask for help so that I know that we practice what we preach and look after our team's well-being."

To be able to design projects that are sensitive to the needs of participants and designers, there needs to be at the root of it all a culture that truly values mental well-being. It is only relatively recently that mental health has become less taboo and recognised as equally important to physical health, and there is a great deal of work to be done.

'Busy' is a mark of success. We value 'busy'. As a culture, our business has become busyness (it is interesting to note that both words derive from the Old English for 'anxiety'). Whether it's at home juggling kids, meals and activities, or at work, juggling clients, projects or budgets, busyness takes a toll on our family lives, our friendships, and our work relationships. Our ability to switch off at the end of the day is compromised by our increasing connectivity, our smartphones chirping at every after-hours email sent by a similarly busy colleague, and the 'reward' of ticking another item off the to-do list.

But what if we valued our mental well-being more? What if we set up the different parts of our lives – work, friendships and families – so that well-being comes first? What if we better understood and accepted the sacrifices that would need to be made?

We might look at the care we've shown for an individual's well-being or our commitment to well-being within a particular project, feeling that we have done our bit. However it's that wider, second-nature culture that we need to establish, remembering not only the importance of well-being in terms of good practice, but also as playing a fundamental role in our success as Service Designers.

Show that it's OK to not be OK.

An important first step is establishing and communicating that it's ok to be affected by difficult issues. It can too easily feel like failure if something triggers an emotional response and becomes overwhelming. If a colleague seems emotional, is our first response to support them or to judge them? Is 'being emotional' valued in our workplace or used as a derogatory term? In these situations soldiering on should not be an option. Time, space and support, if required, should be made available without any imputation or insinuation attached. Boundaries should be respected, time taken to learn how to spot them surfacing, and support offered, as people push back to protect themselves.

Show that it's OK to ask for help.

When we're struggling, we need to ask for help – professional help. We can identify the particularly difficult projects ahead of time where we need to factor in professional help from the beginning. At Snook, we have an openly available list of therapists who have come

highly recommended and who come from diverse disciplines with diverse styles, so that anyone who needs the list can access it. Some companies sign up to becoming part of an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Learn to communicate better.

Non-Violent Communication (NVC) emerged in the 70s but, along with active listening, it is surprising how little headway it has made in the workplace, even in design studios, where we are supposed to be all about listening to others. We seem to be better at listening to users than listening to our colleagues' needs, let alone our own. NVC "guides us in reframing how we express ourselves and hear others… …We are led to expressing ourselves with honesty and clarity, while simultaneously paying others a respectful and empathic attention." (Rosenberg 2015) If we are to place mental wellbeing at the heart of our company cultures, we need to learn new skills, and it starts with better communication skills.

Embed your wellbeing practices.

At Snook, we were reminded recently to keep sharing the practice of assigning a 'supporter' on difficult projects when we realised that our newest team members didn't know that they could ask any of us for help at any time. This is now duly noted in our company wiki and reflected in our on-boarding process which also includes Mental Health First Aid Training.

Conclusion

Our well-being should take precedence over all else. Whether colleagues, staff, managers, or participants, we should always feel safe and supported. By taking steps to recognise and improve our mental health within the context of our projects and our companies, we can begin to effect a positive change with widespread positive results to benefit all

Acknowledgements

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