

Episode 12: 'With Kirsten in Fife'

Podcast Transcript

Life with Alcohol and Drugs

Host: Rebecca Bradley (Scottish Families)

Guest Speaker: Kirsten Holland (Scottish Families)

Introduction:

Interview Begins

Rebecca:

Hello, this morning we're joined by Kirsten Holland, who is our Fife Family Support Development Officer here at Scottish Families, and I actually think you've been with us for a year, nearly a year?

Kirsten:

Nearly a year. A year in July.

Rebecca:

Could you tell us a wee bit more about what you do with us here in Fife?

Kirsten:

Hi, I'm Kirsten. As Rebecca said, I'm the Family Support Development Officer in Fife. It's a new role, as I work in conjunction with NHS addiction services. This is a pilot project, making sure that family support is embedded in patients' care, and that loved ones are supported whilst their family members are in treatment.

It's been a really big learning curve over the last nine to ten months, kind of building this service and the links with all the services in the area. I've got to say, we've been greatly received by everybody else, all other services, and also by families that have not had that specialist support in place previously and now are able to access that.

We offer one-to-one support and also group support. We have a family support group that runs every fortnight, and we also have a family support WhatsApp chat where family members can talk about things that are going on with each other and also with members of staff, with myself monitoring that and giving support if needed. That's been really positive, for the families to feel that there is somebody at the end of the phone, no matter what day or time it is, no matter whether it's a weekend, whatever.

And that reassurance just helps them to feel that they can cope better with what's going on and that they're not alone. It's been fantastic to see the families bonding together and sharing their experiences, even though the substances might be different, the relationships might be different, but what they are experiencing is exactly the same. Them realising that and being able to support each other for that has been really nice to see.

For myself, I've been working in addiction for 8 years now. Previous to this, I was a support worker, working with an individual that used substances, for 5 and a half years at first. I also did the Addiction

Worker Training Project through the Scottish Drugs Forum, which I completed in 2016. Although it's 8 years I've been working in the field, I kind of joke that this is a job I've been training for my whole life. I used to have an addiction myself. I'm 13 years in recovery, but I was also brought up in a family where my father had problems with alcohol over my childhood, and that was really challenging. It's always been something I've been really passionate about.

I first came into contact with Scottish Families at the Recovery Walk in 2015, and I met Soozee and the team at her tent, and I was absolutely blown away by them, by the energy they had and the specialist support that was offered that wasn't available in my area at that point when I was in treatment, there wasn't any of the support like that for my family. I know that things would have been a lot better if they'd had that support while I was getting into recovery. And I thought to myself back then: God, I would love to work with them, but I never ever thought it would be possible. Then last year, a post came up and I thought, right, this might be a bit outwith my abilities but I'm going to try. I'm going to put my application in and go for it because I know that the life that I've led, there's nothing that I can't achieve if I set my mind to it, so I'm not scared to put myself out in those sorts of moments, and I was successful.

So, it's been the most amazing year of my working life, I've got to say. Although I work remotely because I'm a lone worker in Fife, I feel like I'm really connected to the team. I have regular video meetings and catch-ups with everyone across the whole of Scotland, with my other FSDOs, we have a WhatsApp chat, and we have a video meeting every week as well, so if there's anything any of us are struggling with, we can hop on there, have a wee chat and arrange a video meeting with somebody. It's almost like being in an office with people, but we're in separate rooms. That is how it feels. And that's been quite unusual as, obviously, I started during the pandemic. I had my video interview, video inductions, all that sort of stuff. I've only met my manager three times I think, maybe four, but I feel like I'm completely supported, and I feel like part of a unit.

That's about to increase because we've just been allocated funding for a Family Support Development Officer, like myself, and also a Family Support Assistant, in Fife. So, yes, we're going to have a team of colleagues, because it's just been me up until now and I'm really looking forward to getting other people's insights and ideas and being able to all bounce off each other and develop this project so that it's even bigger than I've been able to do myself up to now.

Rebecca:

Thank you. It's like a beautiful Cinderella story happening at Scottish Families! That's amazing, isn't it, you saying that you met us in 2015, so I hadn't even joined yet.

Kirsten:

Right.

Rebecca:

So, the fact that you'd known about it then and then, 6 years later, you joined.

Kirsten:

Going to the Recovery Walk every year, it was definitely the Scottish Families Tent that we always looked out for. I always had my son with me, and I thought it was great for him to be doing the activities, but it was just great to be talking to staff about what they're doing and speaking to other family members. It wasn't just professionals that I was speaking to, it was other family members that

were involved with the service, who were along at that event and singing the praises of the difference it had made to them. That really resonated with me, as something we could really do with in Fife and that would make a huge difference.

Rebecca:

Even with the expansion happening in the service, that just shows you how amazing the work you've done there is in such a short period of time, that it's clear that we need a bigger team there and we need to support more people because I don't even know how many family members you are supporting at the one time, but it's clear that so many people need help, and we need the services.

Kirsten:

In that short period of time, I've had 71 referrals, and that has challenged my ability to develop stuff more because I've been so busy with the one-to-one work and the CRAFT groups and things like that. Getting other people on board means that we can start developing other groups and other activities for family members to do, and really grow what we are able to offer, as I'm not alone and doing it by myself.

Rebecca:

Definitely. I'm assuming there will be lots of wellbeing groups and things that we can do, because that's so important as well. But yes, 71 referrals!

Kirsten:

It's great because I was like, 'Oh my god! I need to make 66 in my first year! How am I going to do that?'

Rebecca:

I know. It's great because people are getting the help they need, but it just shows you: 71 people in Fife.

Kirsten:

And really, we've just touched the tip of the iceberg. I know from my partners at the NHS Addiction Services that there are people in treatment and there are directly 200 family members that manage their loved one's prescribing, so they would probably benefit from this one-to-one support. I've got about two thirds of my referrals through the Addiction Services, so they've been fantastic at giving me a call if they're working with a person and their family has been in contact, and then suggesting the service to them and finding out how they refer in. And just raising awareness, even amongst their teams, so if students come in, they'll be advised to get in touch with me and have a wee video meeting with me to get an introduction into the service and what we offer. There's been discussions about them possibly shadowing me and things like that, so they can get a full idea of what it is that we're offering and what a difference we're making.

And doing that in the middle of a pandemic, when the NHS has been stretched so much, is very much appreciated because I understand the pressures, they're under as well, with the crazy circumstances that we're all living in, or have been living in for the last 2 years.

Rebecca:

That's really great. I was in a meeting with one of our team the other day and I think they described you

as 'powerhouse Kirsten'. Definitely, you are someone we can get some inspiration from.

Kirsten:

I almost feel like I've got total imposter syndrome; it is absolutely ridiculous. I just can't believe that this is my life, and this is what I do for a job, and this is the life I've been able to build. If I think back 15 years ago, before I was in recovery, I was living hand to mouth. I had no dreams or aspirations for the future. I was actually at the point where it was like I didn't know if I could do this anymore, like I was done. Is this as good as it gets? Is this what I deserve in life? And to be where I am now: I've learnt to drive, I've bought a home, I've been on abroad holidays, we've had another child, we've got married, I've trained in this career, and it's not just a job, it's a career.

To have this 13 years, it has felt like a stratospheric rise from where I was to where I am, so I do need to keep pinching myself and keep thinking, what if I'm making everyone think I'm amazing and actually, I'm not that amazing, but the reality is that I'm amazing!

Rebecca:

You are. Definitely.

Kirsten:

I know that. I just need to remind myself sometimes, as I think we all do. Having been a survivor of trauma and the life that I've lived, I'm always going to have self-doubts and have that little voice in my head that tells me I'm not good enough. I just need to remember to challenge that.

Rebecca:

Just talking about how awesome you are, recently, and it's a first for Scottish Families, but you were invited by the Saga University Hospital in Japan, well, you can explain what you did, but it was essentially to give them a talk. That's incredible, getting us as far as Japan!

Kirsten:

It was another 'pinch yourself moment'. I think it was a Monday morning, I'd logged in to my email and there was an email from Yuriko Arima, who is an oncology breast surgeon in NHS Lothians. She'd found my details online and she was asking if I would be involved in doing some shared learning with the Saga University and Japan's mental health teams. They wanted to look at how we dealt with addiction and mental health and things like that in Scotland and what we could offer as a service, what techniques we use. I truly thought it was a scam email! I had to go and Google NHS Lothian's email address to make sure it was correct. I was a bit like, 'Me? Why is she wanting me?' So, I arranged a Teams meeting with her, we had a chat and she explained that she's working on this program of running these seminars to try and share some of the knowledge that we have here in Scotland.

Although we have really awful statistics for drug-related deaths and for alcohol-related deaths, we have fantastic services, and we are very proactive in the way that we discuss addiction. That's not how Japan is. Japan is very much, it's a taboo subject that you don't discuss. So, I had a couple of meetings and discussed what she was looking for. It was looking at identifying and treating addiction in the Covid-19-era. Obviously, from our point of view, we were looking at families. I know from my last few years at work during the pandemic that I had a lot more contact with family members than I previously had. I was working with individuals that were using substances, but I would have regular phone contact with some of their parents and partners, siblings, and things like that.

She came around to my house. We tried to get somewhere in the NHS we could use, but the red tape for getting anything in the NHS is absolutely massive, so it was decided it would just be easier if she came to my house, so she came round to my house. She was absolutely lovely. She was very humble and appreciative of me giving up my time for her. We sat and had a chat, and we discussed the difficulties they are seeing in Japan. And although they are slightly different from what we experience in Scotland, to me, the treatment's the same: it's about cognitive behavioral therapy, it's about families, about connecting people.

What she was discussing is that the Japanese culture is that your children are like gold. They are absolutely what you put 100% of your effort into; raising them, helping them to succeed, and giving them everything that they need. But during the last 2 years of lockdowns and stuff, they'd seen a huge rise in gaming addictions and things like that and problematic behaviour from young people because they weren't getting access to their games and things like that. Also, there were young men with poor mental health and poor coping strategies, and that is something that resonates here in Scotland, this is the problem with have with men and their ability to talk about their mental health.

We had a wee chat about what sort of topics she wanted to be covered and then she started filming. Her laptop was in Japanese, which was interesting, and there was obviously a bit of a language barrier, so she was going to record me and then she took notes. She did amazing because I speak very fast, but she managed to get probably 90% of what I said written down while I was saying it, which I was really impressed with. I gave an introduction to myself, about the work that we do at Scottish Families. I then broke down the problems that we have in terms of alcohol and drugs, so I went through drug-related death stuff and the statistics, and then looking at what we're doing about it. So looking at the new standards, the Right to Recovery Bill, the residential rehab access, and things like that. I also did the same for alcohol. We also discussed cognitive behavioural therapy treatments that we use and other services for working with substance users, to help them change their day-to-day behaviours, and how they would be suitable for gaming addiction and gambling addiction; any sort of behavioural addiction, you can use, the pros and cons, functional analysis, and things like that, to help you look at how you break that pattern.

She was also really interested in how we support each other in the team as we've been working remotely. I've been in my bedroom here; I have been for 2 years. The rest of the staff is the same. So we were looking at how we as a team connect, and as I've already covered, I do feel really connected to my team. I don't feel like I'm alone. I know there's always someone I can reach out to. And I think that is something that can give Scottish Families real kudos, that we really looked into that, and a really big priority has been our wellbeing. That sometimes gets forgotten. And being partnered with the NHS, you see that sometimes that's forgotten about over what needs to be done and the work that needs to be done.

So, I gave her information about support supervision. I get monthly supervision by a senior member of the team, but I've also got access to clinical supervision by the Head of Co-Psychology at Addiction Services. In my last role, I was able to get supervision with her, and as I'm a partner in this role, I'm able to get that supervision as well. So, for any challenging families I'm working with, anybody that I'm struggling with or anything that I'm personally struggling with, I'm able to get access for that. Again, she was really interested in that because that's about the wellbeing of the staff and how we keep people in their jobs and keep people well.

She gave me a bit of feedback from the seminar. She recorded me and then a week later she had translated that into Japanese, and that got played to the seminar on the 1st of March. There were 25 mental health professionals on that seminar. She said that they fed back that it was inspiring and inspirational. It was corrections, communications, care, and kindness were the key words they were coming back with, which, for me, was fantastic. I think that's the key for us at Scottish Families, it's that

care, compassion, and kindness, and looking out for each other. For them to have got that message was really positive.

I think the Japanese culture is very different from the Scottish culture, so I'm not sure how much about alcohol and drugs is really relatable to those experiences, but being able to cover everything, gave them an overview of what sort of techniques they could use and how we deal with the difficulties we experience here in Scotland. All in all, it was a very unusual experience! It was like, 'What are you doing on Thursday, Kirsten?', 'I'm getting videoed by a Japanese doctor for a seminar in Japan. Like me? Really?' She also donated a £100 Amazon gift card to the service, so that went into Fife Family Service, and that's been used to buy craft books for family members, some materials for my office that I need, things like that. It was very much unexpected, but I think for them, they wanted to show they appreciated the fact I was giving up my time and that we were giving up our time to give them that information and support.

Rebecca:

That's amazing because it just shows you how much impact they're having. It's weird to say that because, obviously, you said that you've got imposter syndrome and you don't want to blow your own trumpet, but it just shows how people looking in at our services are seeing the difference that they're making. It's amazing.

Kirsten:

I've got to say Rebecca, that comes from your website, because they did compliment how absolutely comprehensive the website was, what great information it gave you about each member of the team, about the roles we do, about each area and what we offer. So that's kudos to you as well.

Rebecca:

Oh, thank you. I'm glad the website is good for people to get information. It's important. That's always what people need though, that information. That's what they're looking for. When you were speaking about a lot of the things, talking about the care, the compassion, the kindness; I always like to ask our staff team to get information, but what does the word family mean to you?

Kirsten:

For me, family isn't about my blood relations to be totally honest. It's about the people that I have in my life that not just benefit my life, but I feel like I benefit their life. It's the people who have been with me through all of the difficulties I've experienced and the people who lift you up, support you and encourage you, rather than people who criticise, blame and shame. I've had enough of that in my life.

So, for me, family is, I use the word 'fam' a lot with groups of people that I'm close with. My family support group is my Fife Family. My FSDO, my other colleagues, they are my FSDO family, and for me, I think that's really important, to be able to tap into them and have those kind of groups. And again, I know from a family support point of view, that for them, that family is really important as well.

I have what I call a tribe in my life. I've got friends that I've had for over 30 years, their kids who are now 30 years old, and close friends who are my tribe. Those are the people that I go to if I need anything or if I've got something going on, they're the ones I reach out to and share my troubles and my celebrations with as well.

Rebecca:

Yes, it's people who you can speak to, rely on.

Kirsten:

Yes.

Rebecca:

I think, even just listening to you talk, it just shows how amazing a person you are, and you are available in Fife for family support. So, for anybody who is listening who is in Fife or knows someone in Fife who needs support, how can they get in touch with our service?

Kirsten:

It's really straightforward. You can either directly email me on kirsten@sfad.org.uk. Or go onto our website, just Google Scottish Families, and you'll find it. There's information on the Fife service. There's my mobile number and also my email address on that. From there you can get direct contact with me, and you'll get brought into the service, or even just to have a chat about what it is that you're experiencing and what we could support you with. Sometimes, for some people, it's just about getting an opportunity to offload, and that feels enough of a relief at that point.

So, I would say to anybody, if there's anything you're struggling with in relation to someone's substance use, please reach out. It might not be a weekly service that you are requiring, but I absolutely guarantee that you would benefit from having someone to talk to that will understand, other family members that understand, and not feeling alone anymore. We know that families feel alone. They deal with this for a long time before they reach out to somebody. And every family member I've spoken to, out of the 71 so far, has said, I'm so glad I made that call. The difference in just that first conversation and the way that they feel is huge. It can be life-changing for some family members. And that, for me, is really positive to hear as feedback from the people I'm working with because I know that I'm making a difference to their lives and their family's life.

Rebecca:

Thank you so, so much for your time. I'll let you go, seeing as you've got so many people to look after! Yes, thank you so much.

Kirsten:

Thank you very much, Rebecca.

Interview Ends

Exit:

Thank you for listening, if you're worried about somebody else's alcohol or drug use you can contact Scottish Families on 08080 10 10 11 or by email at helpline@sfad.org.uk. We also have webchat and further information on our website www.sfad.org.uk.