

Helping young people through the outdoors - Venture Scotland

Introduction

This practice story describes how Venture Scotland proactively acknowledges and takes action through their programme to reduce suicidal ideation.

The organisation highlights that the key to their success is being able to offer young people:

- ♥ Time, through young people being given at least five months on the programme
- ♥ Space, through the programme being delivered in Scotland's outdoors
- ♥ Compassion, through the commitment, non-judgment and care of staff and volunteers

"Without Venture Scotland, it would have been too late, and I wouldn't be here now."

Venture Scotland participant

The challenge

Venture Scotland don't label themselves a suicide prevention charity, but their work often helps prevent suicide.

They noted that many young people who are in emotional crisis wouldn't join a programme labelled as a 'suicide prevention programme' but they would an activity based one.

What they do

Venture Scotland acknowledges the role they play in preventing suicide.

They support young people aged 16–30 through a long-term personal development programme, lasting at least five months, based in the outdoors.

Activities like hiking, climbing, canoeing, and camping help young people express themselves, build trust, and find hope for the future.

No self-evaluations are asked of young people when entering the programme instead, participants are asked to reflect at the end of each stage of the programme.



This helps them see how they've changed and what they've learned. Often, it's only after months that they feel safe enough to talk about suicidal thoughts.

What they have learned

On reflecting on this work Venture Scotland have highlighted the below principles of Time, Space, Compassion as being key:

Starting well

Venture Scotland prioritise taking time to get to know young people. Their longer induction process helps staff meet each young person several times before they start, which builds trust and shows the young people that they are supported by many caring adults. During the programme each day starts with everyone having breakfast rolls together and chatting to ensure they all feel welcome.

Building relationships

The organisation believes the outdoors is a great place to build strong relationships. The activities and adventures shared between the participants and staff help build trust quickly, this leads to creating safe spaces for open conversations on suicide and other mental health topics.

Being alongside

They follow three youth work principles: participation is voluntary, they meet people where they are, and they work with—not on—them. Staff join in all activities, showing openness and vulnerability. Staff spend a lot of time listening—sometimes in silence, sometimes with empathy, and sometimes with gentle challenge.

The impact

At the end of the programme, young people have often reflected on how far they've come. Many share that they were in a dark place before joining—struggling with depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts.

Some young people commented:

"It has truly changed my life. I had planned to end my life before 30. Now I'm making friends and facing my fears."

"You have no idea how much this experience has changed my life... I can finally believe in myself."

Reflections from members of the Youth Advisory Group on Fife's practice



What they liked:

The 'work with not on' statement as it shows young people have control in their plan and work.
The 'can listen in silence and gentle challenge' statement as both are important.
The 'building relationships is key' statement as it is how you start well with young people.

What they found interesting:

Not having a self-assessment at the start! Having this at different stages helps the young people see their progress and understand their emotions and avoids making young people feel labelled at the start.

Interesting to hear about their approach to not label the service as one involving suicide prevention. The Youth Advisory Group acknowledge that this label can both be negative, because it might not be clear to young people who are at risk of suicide, but also positive, as it allows young people to access support for their mental health through another way.

More information

More information on the work of Venture Scotland can be found [on their website](#).

This includes:

- ♥ Video case study - [Caitlin](#)
- ♥ Case study - [Callum](#)
- ♥ [Impact Report 2023-24](#)

