



L-R: Allison Ferris and Money Advice Caseworker, Lynn Crawford.

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## Citizens Advice support service helps to reduce stress and anxiety

Research carried out by Northumbria University, Newcastle shows that people who use the Citizens Advice Service in Gateshead feel less stressed and anxious after doing so.

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Citizens Advice is a charity that offers free advice and information to help people with their financial, legal, consumer and other problems. As well as helping clients with the problems they face, Citizens Advice also aim to improve the policies that affect people's lives.

The research team worked with Citizens Advice Gateshead to evaluate how the advice services offered helped to improve people's health. The 18-month study involved surveying and interviewing nearly 200 people who used the service at the point they first contacted them and then six months later.

Sonia Dalkin, Researcher and Lecturer at Northumbria University said: "The Citizens Advice Bureau provides practical help and support to people at a time when they are often suffering from stress and anxiety. The service can already demonstrate how the practical support they provide benefits their clients, but until now, there was no evidence to show what impact this had on their health.

"The results of the research showed a clear increase in the health and wellbeing of people amongst everyone who took part, as well as a significant reduction in stress. Given the known links between stress and health, the support they provide is likely to have a positive impact on people's physical health too.

"It also showed the important role the service has in helping clients navigate

through complex systems and processes in gaining access to services which can help them. The research also found that it helped to prevent the health of clients with pre-existing mental health conditions from deteriorating further.”

Former nurse Allison Ferris from Gateshead was encouraged to seek help from the service by one of her health workers. Allison, who has a history of mental health problems, contacted Citizens Advice Gateshead for help in completing some forms regarding her benefits.

She said: “Although I consider myself as personally independent, some days are really tough and it’s a real struggle to get out of bed. I was quite embarrassed about seeking help but I knew that if I hadn’t then there was a strong chance that my health and situation would have got much worse.”

Having met with Allison, the advisors not only helped her with her forms but also referred her on to a support service to help her manage her debt and a charity that specifically supports nurses. As a result, her debt was reduced and she was given some practical support.

Allison continued: “I really liked the fact that they provide you with options and ask you how you would like to proceed. I had a number of things to do myself following the advice and they (Citizens Advice Gateshead) did too; they also got back to me to tell me with what they’d achieved. They were amazing and I know I couldn’t have done what they did. I felt like a weight had been lifted from me. It was a huge relief. Their support ensured I could continue to be independent. My health and wellbeing is so much better as a result and has without doubt stopped my health and financial situation from getting worse – which it would have done. The positive impact has been felt by my friends and family too.”

Speaking about the service Allison said: “I can’t thank them enough. I got much more help and support than I ever imagined. They were so lovely and efficient - they deserve a medal. I don’t think people are aware of the support they offer and that it’s available for everyone. It’s totally confidential and you don’t need an appointment.”

Alison Dunn, Chief Executive Officer of Citizens Advice Gateshead said: “We are extremely grateful for the research findings. We knew that our clients benefited practically and health-wise as a result of the service we provide,

but until now, we haven't been able to evidence the latter.

“This research will be extremely useful in demonstrating the health impact of not just Citizens Advice Gateshead, but of the service nationally. We will continue to monitor the impact of the service on our clients' health, which will be crucial in demonstrating the benefits of the service to funders.”

The £150,000+ research project was funded by the National Institute for Health Research School for Public Health Research (SPHR) which works to build an evidence base for effective practice in public health with the aim of improving population health and reducing health inequalities and supported by Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health.

Susan Carr, Professor of Public Health Research at Northumbria University and Associate Director at Fuse added: “We have been delighted to support this research project. Advice services are complex support channels, which are highly tailored to the specific needs of individuals and are often delivered in conjunction with other services. Establishing direct evidence for their impact on health has therefore been challenging”.

“The study findings clearly demonstrate a positive link on the health and wellbeing of service users and are transferable when demonstrating the benefits of advice services on public health. I am sure the research will be of interest to commissioners, researchers and service providers.”

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