



Case study

**Walk & Talk 999 –
Walking for wellbeing**

Project at a glance

- London firefighter Dean Corney was part of a team looking at how to encourage men to ask for help with their mental health.
- Inspired by a local ‘walk and talk’ led by a counsellor, he organised a regular event where male firefighters could connect during a 45-minute stroll round a local park.
- The sessions don’t involve counselling, but signposting is available, and being out in a group in nature helps the men feel part of a community.
- The sessions have helped at least three firefighters return to work after being signed-off for mental health problems.

The challenge

Hearing shocking statistics on male suicide inspired London firefighter Dean Corney and colleagues to help break the stigma around men asking for mental health support.

“It was just overwhelming to hear,” he said.

“Traditionally men don’t reach out for help and they don’t talk about their problems. It’s difficult for everyone, even in the emergency services. We need to find ways to encourage men to talk. And the Walk & Talk 999 is a simple way to do that.”

Through his own experiences Dean understands the barriers to asking for help.

“I realise that over my life and career I hadn't reached out for help when I should have or talked to anyone about what I was going through,” he says.

Walk & Talk 999's response

The fire brigade offers counselling for staff. Dean knew that not everyone wants or needs therapy and wanted to show it's OK to reach out.

By chance, he found out about a counsellor who ran a men's 'walk and talk' session. He went along and was impressed hearing people's wellbeing journeys and the experience of being out in nature talking with like-minded people.

"It was such a simple idea. But for some of the people it was life-changing," he says.

Each session starts with a simple check-in circle where people share how they're feeling on a scale of one to ten. They also share something positive that's going on in their lives. Dean explains that everything people say at the session is strictly confidential – and the group are asked not to interrupt or challenge when someone's speaking.

“I'm clear that this is not counselling, but it is a safe space people can talk” Dean

After that, the group sets off for a 45-minute walk round the local park. People are free to talk about anything, or nothing.

The group finishes with a coffee at the local cafe for anyone who wants to stay.

"It's simple," says Dean. "But it's really effective – there's a proper community feel."



The results

Dean says, “I thought it would be just me and my colleague Mark Smith walking on our own! But right from the start we’ve had anything from five to ten people coming every week – and people are still finding us.”

At the check-out afterwards people’s moods improve “without fail”, says Dean. They might also feel comfortable sharing things they didn’t before.

Some of the walks’ unique power comes from shared experience. Dean says that talking with people outside the services might mean explaining the build-up to a difficult job. But with other emergency personnel they can go straight to the part they need to talk about.

Dean adds there’s a real “hunger” for what the walks provide. And now people from the Metropolitan Police, the NHS and others are interested in getting involved – or running their own versions. This success presents its own challenges.



“Simply knowing they’re not alone can be very positive. We’ll also signpost to mental health services for people that need them.” Dean

Learning

- **Be clear and consistent**

Dean says that the idea is successful because it's very easy to understand and communicate. Also, the walk is at the same time and place each week, so people know it's always there for them.

- **Think about your own experiences**

Dean realised that despite being vocal about mental health, he'd felt unable to ask for help when he was struggling. Thinking about why, helped him consider the barriers men might face before asking for help.

- **The power of peer support**

People often feel better understood by their peers. And when you do a stressful job, talking to your peers can be a short-cut to being understood, since they may have experience of what you're going through.

- **Nature can help**

Many studies show that being outside can boost people's mental health. Running the walks around a local park helps take participants away from their everyday life and gives them the chance to open up about how they're feeling.



Relevant support available

Mental Health Awareness for Sport & Physical Activity+ eLearning

How to have conversations about mental health

Blue Light Together website

