



# CHS

# NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 02 - April 2022

COMMUNITY HELP SERVICE

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## CHS Continues to Grow After 50

In 2021, CHS celebrated its 50th Anniversary of supporting the English-speaking community in Belgium, albeit extremely quietly due to COVID-19. Established with the active support of the local English-speaking pastoral community, the initial goal of the CHS was to provide practical support to British and American expatriates coming to live and work in Belgium. Back then, in the days before the UK had even joined the European Union, the focus was on

where to find an English-speaking tradesman, dentist or doctor.

Since then, the CHS has grown and evolved. Today, it comprises two distinct services both supported by an active volunteer network: The Helpline and the Mental Health Services Centre (MHSC). The Helpline dates back to 1971. We currently have 24 volunteers who are supervised and supported by two psychologists. Our Helpline is anonymous, confidential and

free, and supports the English-speaking community in Belgium. Given Brussels' role as the so-called "Capital of Europe", there are very many people here who have English as a second or even third language.

2021 was another record-breaking year for the Helpline taking nearly 7,000 calls – a 50% increase over 2020. One of our biggest challenges this year has been a fundamental

*Continued on page 2*

rethink of our telephone service, switching to a new system. Now each of our Helpline volunteers has a dedicated Smartphone and SIM card connected to our telephone network. On average, our volunteers spend 80 hours a month talking to callers to the Helpline. Nearly 90% of calls to the Helpline come from mobile phones and roughly 20% of calls to the Helpline come from people not living in Belgium. This was a real eye-opener for many of us and demonstrates the global reach of CHS.

It is also clear that a small number of individuals rely on the CHS Helpline as a lifeline and they call multiple times a day. We find, not surprisingly, that calls tend to peak around 1.00pm, 7.00pm and 10.00pm. In future, and depending on our volunteer resource, we might consider having multiple volunteers on these “busy” shifts, something we could not do with the old system. However, an analysis of average call duration by hour provides further interesting data. The longest calls to the Helpline are those received between midnight and 4.00am – nearly three times as long as a call at other times of the day. Such calls tend to be from callers in significant distress, which is why we tend to use more experienced volunteers to take these night shifts. Over 90% of our callers are looking for emotional support. The remaining are looking for practical information on life in Belgium, the service we started over 50 years ago!

The Mental Health Services Centre

brings together a group of nineteen mental health practitioners – psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and psychotherapists, who provide services to a wide range of individuals. Divided into two teams – one for children and adolescents, and another for adults – the MHSC is a vital part of the community.

In 2021 we received calls from over 1,400 people to receive consultations, representing over 40 different nationalities, although it’s fair to say that UK, US and Belgians (which includes an increasing number of British people post Brexit) account for roughly 30% of this number. Needless to say, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed huge strains on our team with appointment requests increasing by 33% since last year. Inevitably, a proportion of these callers cannot be seen in-house and so they are provided with the contact details of other practitioners and mental health centres.

We are always glad to hear from those who might be interested in volunteering, whether with the Helpline or to work in the Offices at the CHS mental health centre in Brussels.

**Author:** Jeremy Jennings  
Chairman - CHS

WHAT'S INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 1 CHS continues to Grow After 50
- 3 Meeting Children in Family Mediation
- 4 A Book Review on Susan Pinker
- 5 A Closer Look at Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
- 6 Volunteers' Segment
- 9 Mindfulness for Children



Photo credit: Pixabay

# Meeting Children in Family Mediation?

Family mediation is an increasingly well-known process used for couples that separate.

As a family mediator, I see a wide spectrum of cases: from couples who just want legal separation support, to high conflict separations, to partners who suffer from mental health problems, addictions or violence....

But one question is hanging no matter the type of case: should the mediator meet the children? Is it beneficial, and if yes, to all parties? In Belgium, this is a difficult question to which most often the answer is negative. But both my experience and reflection have made me take a contending approach.

The inherent fear that stops the mediators is the risk of “damage” to the children. The idea behind this is that only psychologists have the necessary abilities while mediators usually come from a legal background. Additionally, the fact that in 81% of court decisions, the judge follows the opinion the child has expressed in a hearing, showcases a risky approach. Another argument is that mediation is a space for parents only. There are indeed other ways to give children a place: empty chair, check their interest in the agreement...

So why did I decide to include

children in mediation? For the following reasons:

- Testimonies of children that they would have liked to have had a voice in the separation process.
- Legally, as per 12 of the ICCR, article 22bis al.2 of the Belgian Constitution, article 1004 of the Judicial Code that organises the hearing of the children, the light is green!
- The inclusion as a practice in other countries, e.g. Canada, and also in cross-border cases.
- Many “good” parents are self-centred in the conflict and are not really «available» to accommodate the feelings of their children. Or, they feel lost and helpless. Sometimes, the children don’t talk to them. Sometimes, they give two different versions. Sometimes, one parent believes that the child who refuses to see him/her is alienated.
- My long practice as a mediator in psychiatric hospitals where I meet children 4-18 yrs old has shown that despite age and mental problems, children can express their feelings and they pose valuable questions about their rights.

Personally, the main objective to meet a child is to offer the opportunity to express themselves in the separation process : “How are you?”. Maybe they won’t say a thing. Maybe they will be relieved. Maybe, the mediator will see that they need support.

The mediator can clarify the legal process : “No, you are not going to decide until you are 18. But maybe you have an opinion, idea or a message to share with your parents?”

It is a subtle job and the mediator must be trained and supervised, the parents must be prepared, the objectives and the framework of this meeting must be clear.

It is important that the balance between any potential harm such as a meeting may cause and the benefits the children could gain, is evaluated carefully!

**Author:** Julie Rentmeesters  
Médiatrice familiale agréée  
Cross-border Family mediator  
(CHS)

# Check out this Book Review!



Click the **PLAY** button to access Sandra Pinker's YouTube talk video

### What this book is about:

This book is brilliant and persuasive in showing us with psychological and sociological studies how face-to-face contact and physical proximity is the key to health, longevity and well-being, while online connections make us lonelier and unhappier and represent a potential public health risk.

### The main message:

The writer uses a relatively new field of social neuroscience together with theories, anecdotes, evidence and trends to

convincingly explain why face-to-face contact is now, in the age of technology, more important than ever. She explores in this book the impact of real contact from cradle to grave, from early childhood, to classroom and workplace, from love, to marriage to divorce.

She does not advocate the way of life before the internet, but suggests making an effort, at work and in our private lives, to promote greater levels of personal connection for our own happiness.

### Why you should read it:

Although written in 2014, it is particularly relevant in 2022, after two years of COVID-related massive replacement of real connection by online formats.

Now is the time to rethink how we want to balance and create healthy connections with the people around us and make in-person social interactions a priority, be it in the family, at work and elsewhere.

**Author:** Lisa Classen  
Clinical and Child  
Psychologist (CHS)

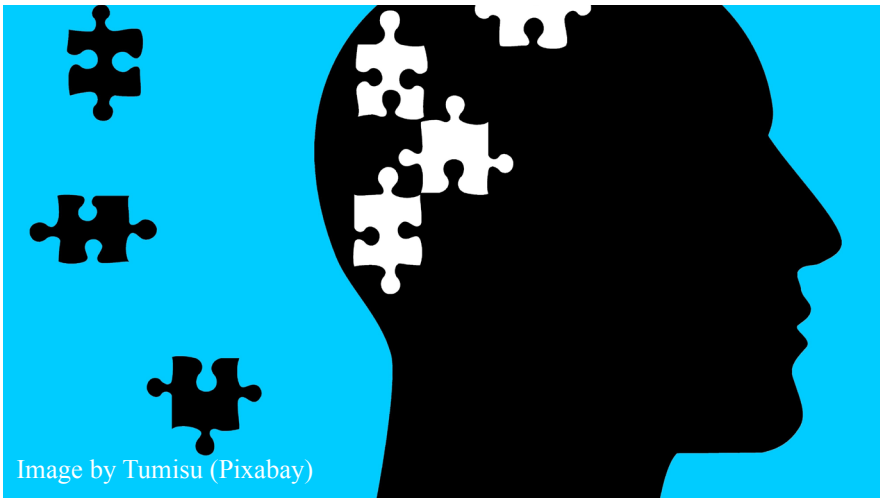


Image by Tumisu (Pixabay)

## A closer look at Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) aims at treating unhelpful thoughts and behaviours directly by evidence based interventions.

Behavioural therapy for mental health has been around since the early 1900s with the work of key proponents of behaviourism such as Pavlov and Skinner.

According to this paradigm behaviours can be measured, modelled and changed. The therapy was further developed in response to the emotional difficulties experienced by veterans of the second world war. The American psychologist Albert Ellis' work is key in this regard. He devised a form of cognitive psychotherapy in the 1950s which he called rational behavioural therapy (REBT). REBT is based on the idea that emotional distress arises from thoughts about an event rather than the event itself.

In the 1950s and 60s Aaron T Beck posited that depressed clients held negative views of self, others and

the future, which were impossible to shift by exploration of the past. He investigated whether these negative views might in fact be the reason the person was depressed.

CBT focuses on changing automatic negative thoughts and the therapist treats the client as an equal, helping the client to become a therapist to himself. The client learns to use tools so that the therapist is no longer needed, and the client's family and partner can be included in the process. The treatment plan can take the form of graded exposure or systematic desensitisation, the aim of which is to expose the person to the source of his discomfort in a considered way. The therapist helps the client to recognise distortions in obsessive and frightening thoughts and to see that one doesn't have to trust negative thoughts. I like to suggest that clients think of satirical images for their negative thoughts. A client who had obsessive punishing thoughts around food came up

with "North Korea" thoughts to describe them and this helped him to recognise how strict and brutal his thoughts were. Another client who was bullied by her thoughts called them her "Trump thoughts".

Avoidance of unhelpful thoughts and behaviours keeps anxiety fuelled. We all experience distorted thoughts and engage in avoidance. Procrastination with work is an example of this. However, it is when thoughts become preoccupying and obsessive and avoidance gets out of hand that we cannot get on with our lives. Extreme avoidance causes anxiety to generalise and extend to other areas.

CBT has given rise to new types of therapy such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) which encourages clients to embrace their thoughts and feelings rather than resist them. Steven Hayes, the founder of ACT, likens fighting off one's bad thoughts and emotions to struggling in quicksand. One only sinks deeper into the sand when one resists. Clients are encouraged to accept and learn from their bad feelings. Flexibility in accepting sadness and anger is encouraged. ACT combines mindfulness skills with the practice of self-acceptance.

If you are looking for a short-term therapy to address negative patterns of thought and behaviour, CBT or ACT may be the way to go.

**Author:** Nicole Josephson  
Clinical Psychologist  
Psychotherapist (CHS)



## VOLUNTEERS' SEGMENT



### My journey to becoming a CHS Helpline volunteer explained...

Since the start of the COVID pandemic, I thankfully have not had any of the struggles that have besieged many individuals and families, such as sickness, bereavement, anxiety or loss of employment. However, it seemed to me that unless you were a medical professional or other key worker, all you could do to help the country and humanity was to follow the government's guidelines and stay at home. I felt helpless and restless that I was not able to do more.

I then chanced upon a CHS advert seeking volunteers for its

Helpline. I had never worked on a helpline before but I am a good listener and so I applied. After an interview, I was delighted and a bit nervous to be accepted. I was allocated a mentor and my training lasted around two months. I got to meet the other volunteers that work on the Helpline. They are a diverse and very friendly group, and we all clearly share a desire to be a source of support and comfort to each and every Helpline caller. I began to feel part of a community.

During 2021, my first full year volunteering, the Helpline

answered about 7,000 calls. Some were from people feeling suicidal, a heartbreaking situation. Most calls were from those looking for emotional support for a wide range of issues, such as feeling lonely and/or depressed, experiencing family problems, stress at work and financial concerns. Finally, about 6% of the calls were from those looking for general information. Callers to the Helpline are diverse: from many different nationalities, male and female, old and young - sadly even children.

Having been a volunteer on the

Helpline for some 18 months now, I really appreciate what a crucial role the Helpline plays in supporting the English speaking community living in Belgium.

It takes strength and courage to reach out, which makes me proud of every person who calls us. It is

never easy to listen to someone in distress or emotional turmoil, but many times the call ends with the caller sounding, at that moment, a little calmer and better placed to face their worries.

“The Helpline is currently looking for listening volunteers. For more

details, please email us at :

**office@chsbelgium.org**  
**or call: 02 647 6780.**

**Author:** A Helpline Volunteer



## Volunteering - A Balancing Act

‘Volunteering is a luxury’ said an acquaintance to me recently. She asked me how my business was going and instead I told her about the new projects I was working on at my volunteer job.

Not long ago I pivoted from a stay-at-home mom, expat-trailing wife to starting my own business. At the same time, I decided to volunteer for something I care deeply about, mental health. For many years, I have been a resource and an ally in healing to a family member suffering from mental health issues and it only felt natural that I would want to extend my support to others in my community.

Starting a volunteer job and building a business at the same time might seem counterproductive to some. I like quick results and I knew that might not be possible with a new venture. In doing volunteer work, being there for someone in need, listening with compassion and empathy, getting involved in different projects, means I am contributing. It means I am useful to my fellow human beings. It means that for the time I devote, there are quick results.

I transferred the enthusiasm of having done something meaningful and invested it into my business. I’ve become more resourceful and creative in dealing with the ups and downs

of being a new entrepreneur; when the phone is not ringing and clients are not signing up for the services I provide, I know I still contributed value to someone. To me, this is a balancing act.

What I get in return for my time invested is invaluable. Volunteering gives me a sense of connection to like-minded people, I am serving my community, I am stretching my comfort zone, I am learning and I am being challenged.

So yes, volunteering could be seen as a luxury. Because the rewards are priceless.

**Author:** A Helpline Volunteer

## The spotlight on a volunteer's experience

I am sure that the main reason for anyone volunteering is a desire to make a contribution to their community, to give back to society in return for benefits they may have received in the past.

As volunteers, what we get back may go well beyond the satisfaction of feeling we are 'doing our bit'. Although some people will always try to help in a limited capacity even when they have heavy family and work commitments, for many it will only really be possible when life has become less busy and there is a bit more time to spare, for instance, after retirement, when children have gone to school full time or even left home for further training, a break in employment or accompanying a partner to a country where a work

visa is not available. Whatever the reason, being able to work at something we feel is worthwhile with like-minded people can be a very positive experience. It is possible to meet all sorts of people from different places, different ages and different parts of society. Hopefully, we bring skills from our previous work and life experience, but also learn new skills and face challenges which we would not have faced before.

In the expatriate community, where we are often far away from extended family, being part of a volunteer group can be supportive at times when we need an external focus to help us through our own less positive moments.

Having a regular commitment can give shape and purpose to our lives when we may feel a lack in direction due to a change in circumstances.

From personal experience, volunteering over the last few years, I have met some really interesting colleagues, used IT which might have otherwise passed me by, and learned a lot about life from the professionals we work with and their clients. The work I do as a volunteer is not spectacular or glamorous in any way but there is still a little bit of me which feels good when my efforts make a small difference to someone who needs help.

**Author:** An Office Volunteer

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# Your Help is NEEDED

# VOLUNTEER

# TODAY!



Photo credit: Pixabay



# Mindfulness for Children

While Mindfulness may seem for some like a new and unexplored topic, it is well researched. In 2018 alone there were 842 articles published about this. It is supported by the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) and has been evidenced in Neuroscience (Farb et al, 2007).

Mindfulness helps train our attention to be more aware of what is actually happening rather than worrying about what did or might happen.

Many argue that the most important prerequisites for child development are executive control and emotion regulation. These main contributors to self regulation underpin emotional wellbeing, effective learning and academic attainment. There is promising evidence that mindfulness training has been shown to enhance executive control in children and adolescents in line with adult evidence.

At CHS we recently launched a

“Mindfulness for 9 to 14-year-olds program”.

Designed by MISP (Mindfulness in School Projects) in collaboration with London School of Economics, the 4-lesson program supports young people during a key time of change. This includes students transitioning between primary and secondary school, having their first formal examinations, undergoing physical changes (puberty) as well as significant social changes i.e., peer groups. Each session is between 60 to 90 minutes, and is once a week for 4 weeks. The lessons combine simple mindfulness practices and theory, neuroscience and social and emotional learning. At the most basic level the program aims: for all students to know about mindfulness, for most students to enjoy it, for many students to use it as needed, for some students to practice daily, and for as many students as possible to remember it.

This program has reached over

11,000 students and explores issues around:

Attention, Worry, Sleep and Relationships.

Should you wish to find out more about mindfulness and all existing programs, please feel free to contact me. I work with children/adolescents between the ages of 9-14 years and adults; on an individual basis or in groups, depending on the needs of each client.

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 Certified Mindfulness and Meditation Teacher  
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 Tel : 0498852824

Next dates for the children workshop:  
**Wednesdays: 27.4; 4.5; 18.5; 25.5.2022 from 16:00-17:30 at CHS**

Mindfulness

# KIDS FEEDBACK

MINDFULNESS  
Good &  
Cool &  
FUN

Good COOL!  
Sweet.  
FUNNY.  
ARAN  
Fact: More candy.

i learned IT FELT  
that mind full-GOOD  
ness  
felt and i wish  
good i got more  
and it make candy

in that i felt:  
calm  
more mind full  
it was fun!  
☺

I learned how to calm myself  
down and control myself.  
I found it interesting and a new  
experience to make. Was also  
funny to make with my friends.

Images: Gabriella Fitterer



Anonymous and Confidential support from our trained Helpline volunteers

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Materials or Presentations to support your organisation or school

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Therapy with our diverse clinical team

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Psycho-educational Assessments for children



**BOOK A CHS APPOINTMENT**

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MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES CENTRE



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