KEY MESSAGES
MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL SUPPORT: LINKING RESEACH AND PRACTICE

2nd NOVEMBER 2016, DUNDEE
VHS, THE OPEN UNIVERSITY & SUPPORT IN MIND SCOTLAND

VHS, the Open University and Support in Mind Scotland have partnered together to present a programme of events across the country on mental health and social support, running between November 2016 and June 2017. The Dundee seminar on 2nd November was attended by 40 delegates drawn from national and local third sector organisations, NHS bodies and local authorities.

This briefing aims to give VHS members an overview of the key messages from the presentations and the subsequent discussion.

Dr Jonathan Leach, the Open University: Improving Mental Health through Social Support

Dr Leach presented findings from his research.

Social support underpins mental wellbeing: people are supported to deal with crises. Small acts of kindness, unpaid and unrecognized, that have a really meaningful impact on people's lives. Social support can be provided by a range of people in a variety of different roles. Neighbours, librarians, friends, family, and even university wardens can provide social support which can have a positive impact on people's mental health. Social support works alongside clinical interventions and can help to inform clinical work.

There are five elements of social support that work across a range of structures; Formal (e.g. support worker), semi-formal (e.g. colleague), informal (e.g. friend) and close (e.g. partner or relative).

1. **Friendship:** based on equality and reciprocity with people we share a similar outlook with and usually a similar economic and social status.
    a. Peer support may come into this category: someone with shared experience who understands the problem and has genuine empathy.
2. **Emotional Support:** in the form of listening and being heard, accepting people and also lifting a person's mood. The messages that we give back to people.
    a. Sophisticated comforting messages: messages that focus on people's needs and are empathetic.

b. Non-sophisticated: not listening, rather than helping an individual come to a solution telling them what you would do.
3. **Constructing meaning:** sharing experience that then constructs, whether positively or negatively, the meaning of mental health.
4. **Practical advice:** This is a tricky area as it is harder to give appropriate advice if you do not have lived experience and an understanding of the situation someone is facing. This needs to be based on the needs of the person you are supporting.
5. **Material assistance:** help with finances, transport, housing, learning a new skill. This can be empowering as it can help someone lead a 'normal life'. How it is given is important as it can make people uncomfortable in situations where there is a lack of reciprocity.

There are three types of caring relationships:

Positive: the person being cared for is seen as an individual and is not defined by the problems they face, and the carer also looks after their own needs.
Emotionally over-involved: the carer becomes too involved and neglects their own needs.
Critical or hostile: the person being cared for is defined by their problems for which they are blamed. The carer feels resentful, angry and depressed.

Risks involved in providing social support:

Confidentiality: this can be breached as people are not set by rules or laws in the same way as clinicians.
Catastrophising: person providing support can reinforce negative attitudes.
Disempowering relationship: receiving such support can result in a power imbalance.
Spoiling relationship: friends or relatives may not want to discuss issues or problems you may be facing.
Inappropriate advice: risk of given inappropriate advice.
Unclear boundaries: boundaries in different relationships can become blurred.

Overall social support is more intuitive and is more readily available compared to therapies. Research suggests that those without social support are overly dependent on therapies and formal support.

Frances Simpson, Support in Mind Scotland - Combatting Loneliness

Social support is an important aspect of the work that Support in Mind Scotland (SIMS) do. They aim to improve the quality of life for anyone whose mental health problems or mental illness has a serious impact on their life and on the lives of others, including family members, friends and supporters.

Three national projects that they run:

Equally Fit: helping to address the physical implications of mental health

Rural Mental Health: conducting a major survey of rural areas asking people about their mental health and wellbeing.
Carers Campaign: campaigning for a statutory right to independent advocacy for carers.

Support in Mind Scotland supports people affected by mental health issues to think about what it is that they really want and then achieve those ambitions. SIMS' experience over many years is that social support is crucial to people's mental wellbeing, but the charity's experience is that it is hard to demonstrate the link between informal social support and mental health outcomes, and consequently hard to convince funders of the value of investing in it. Reconnecting a man with his long lost brother was such an example. This is why Jonathan Leach's research is so invaluable: it provides evidence that gives credibility to informal forms of support.

Louise Christie, Scottish Recovery Network – The Power of Peer Support

Recovery means recovering a fulfilling and satisfying life. Mental health problems and wellbeing are not always correlated. You may have a diagnosed mental health problem but enjoy good wellbeing or you may have no diagnosed mental health problems but have poor mental wellbeing. Research from around the world shows that despite different cultures and differences in understanding mental health problems, people's experiences of what works or what enables recovery are the same. Rather than focusing on the problems it is important to look at what people say works for them. Peer support can be an important element in supporting recovery and has the following features: shared experience: mutual relationship; strengths based; powerful and empowering.

Key Messages from Discussion

There was a widely shared view in the audience that the NHS does not readily recognize or signpost people to social support. Likewise, peer support is important but not readily considered or available via the NHS. The third sector is not seen as an equal partner. The NHS is not set up to provide social support but there needs to be a better balance between medical and non-medical interventions.

- Working with the NHS is problematic but it is very important. The third sector is often dismissed for not being professional, skilled or capable. However, there are positive experiences as well. Support in Mind Scotland provide support to young people in the CAMHS unit in Dundee and this is recognised by the NHS.
- NHS Tayside Listening Services is a good example of statutory and voluntary services working together.

What is the difference between peer and mutual support?

- Mutuality is a key element of peer support and the main element of mutuality is having a lived or shared experience.
- Mutuality in social care is derived from having a shared or lived experience, working together and being mutually supportive.

People often don't want professional help, they want people to see them as a person, talk to them and help them overcome their social isolation. Experience shows that many people want to access informal support around them (for example, from neighbours, in their community, family) rather than seeking out professional help. People can open up more in the comfort and safety of their own home. Supporting people on a one-to-one bases can help them build social networks so that they can be comfortable engaging in peer support groups or accessing professional support.

Taking childhood trauma as an example, some types of social support are not enough. People do not have the training or qualifications to deal with these types of issues. People open up to informal social support but the provider may not be confident about what to do or where to refer on. It is important to think about how and when someone may feel safe to talk about their issues. Learn how people can acknowledge or discuss their trauma without going into too much detail. You can discuss the limits or parameters of how these issues can be discussed in a way that makes people feel comfortable.

There is not enough talking therapy for people who need it. Support in Mind Scotland uses a range of methods and their services complement clinical interventions. It is important that it is not either or, that you provide a mix of things that people need at different times in their lives.

The Emotional Freedom Technique was highlighted by the Open University as a useful resource to promote and use. The NHS is teaching patients how to use EFT methods for themselves.

Useful Resources
Improving Mental Health through Social Support – Building Positive and Empowering Relationships. Dr Jonathan Leach

Voluntary Health Scotland Response to Mental Health in Scotland – A 10 year vision

Support in Mind Scotland Response to Mental Health in Scotland – A 10 year vision

For information about future events on mental health and support contact:
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