

KEY MESSAGES

MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL SUPPORT LINKING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

27 April 2017, Helensburgh

VHS, Support in Mind Scotland and the Open University are running a collaborative programme of events on mental health and social support between November 2016 and June 2017. Following seminars in Dundee and Glasgow we held this workshop in Helensburgh on 27th April. The 40 delegates came from a wide cross section of organisations, including many from Argyll and Bute. They represented national and local charities, NHS bodies, local authorities, health and social care partnerships, Police Scotland, Scottish Fire and Rescue and universities.

This report summarises key messages from the presentations and discussions. The full presentations are available on the VHS website.

Delegates' stated reasons for attending included:

- To learn about techniques and methods to support people with mental health issues.
- To learn about what can be done to support people with mental health issues beyond clinical or formal services.
- Networking
- Scottish Fire and Rescue colleagues were interested in broadening their own role to think about how they might support people with mental health issues, increase their understanding of mental health and build links with relevant organisations
- Learn about ways to address the issue of loneliness and social isolation which is increasingly being seen as an underlying issue for many people with poor mental health.

Dr Jonathan Leach, the Open University

Jonathan presented research findings from his book: '[Improving Mental Health through Social Support](#)'. Why is mental health a social issue? Having just one or two strong social connections can reduce loneliness and social isolation and improve mental health and wellbeing. Social support provides this connection and is important as it underpins mental wellbeing and supports people to deal with crises.

Social support can be provided by a range of people in a variety of different roles. However, if people are not supported in their community this can increase the pressure on clinical services that are not always intuitive and suitable and are at often times always oversubscribed. Meaning is socially and culturally constructed and if a community does not understand mental health this can reinforce stigma and further isolate people suffering from mental health issues.

The newly published study into Rural Mental Health conducted by Support in Mind Scotland shows that 38 out of 243 respondents felt supported in their communities, whilst 90 felt they were not supported enough and 45 felt that they were not supported in their community. Living in rural communities can have both a positive and negative affect on people's mental health, depending on the quality of connections within that community.

There are five elements of social support; engaging in friendship, providing emotional support, constructing meaning, offering practical advice and giving material assistance. These elements of social support are used to differing degrees by a range of relationship structures; Formal (e.g. support worker), semi-formal (e.g. colleague), informal (e.g. friend) and close (e.g. partner or relative). Social support, if not provided appropriately can have risks both for the person providing the social support and the person receiving it. However, it is more intuitive and more readily available than therapies and formal support.

Frances Simpson, Chief Executive, Support in Mind Scotland

Social support is an important aspect of the work that Support in Mind Scotland (SiMS) do. It is not unique to SiMS: many other organisations and community groups understand and provide social support. There has been a lot of discussion around connections within a community, a new piece of work that that Support in Mind Scotland are working on is exploring what "Well Connected Communities" actually mean and look like.

The five elements of social support that Jonathan described provide an evidence base and credibility to the concept of social support. Social support can exist alongside formal services. It plays a role in early intervention as providers of social support can signpost to health professionals and services as soon as issues emerge.

Peer support is an important element of social support as it supports people to share their experiences. The Scottish Recovery Network has developed 6 principles of peer support. SiMS understood that peer support is very important and that they provided a lot of it, but wanted to understand this further. The Support in Mind Scotland Survey looked at the role staff with lived experience played in peer support. "73% of staff feel their lived or carer experience influences their work within SiMS". This is a very important statistic as it raises issues around personal disclosure which does not happen in formal services. Peer support also raises a number of issues around boundaries: what happens once people share their experience but the relationship breaks down?

Pauline, Glasgow Carers Group, Support in Mind Scotland

Pauline was a carer for her mother who had schizophrenia. She spoke about her experience at the Charlie Reid Carers Centre. Pauline's own mental health was fragile as she was caring for her mother and she felt that outside the carers centre there was a lack of understanding of mental health. No one understood the ripple effect of a caring role on family members and other relationships. When in the Charlie Reid Centre she felt compassion and could speak freely about her experiences. The carers centre developed confidence, provided peer and mutual support amongst carers, it lowered loneliness and gave the carers support, empathy and friendship. Carers have a lack of support and a network so this type of support is invaluable.

There are also a number of issues around the physical and mental health of older carers. Recovery should mean a holistic approach for both the person being cared for and their carers.

Topics highlighted in discussion

Studies show that loneliness and social isolation are getting worse as people's lives are becoming more private. NHS Highland's [Loneliness and Health: The Annual Report of the Director of Public Health 2016](#) revealed relatively little difference in levels of loneliness and social isolation between very rural areas and towns in Highland. How to encourage communities to address the human need for social connectedness? It is not about the number of connections but rather the quality of connections. If geographical communities are not rising to this challenge, then how can we help develop other types of communities, e.g. digitally or through arts and recreation.

More needs to be done to secure funding to tackle loneliness and social isolation. Tendering and procurement is becoming a difficult process. There are limited funds and very strict criteria for funding. This restricts the services that organisations can provide and the people they can reach. Community initiatives are a good idea as they require small amounts of funding and have a greater impact. The Big Lottery's [Improving Lives](#) programme has a social isolation, loss and loneliness funding stream.

This is a timely event as Health and Social Care Partnerships are reviewing their mental health plans. Argyll and Bute TSI are working to create new projects that encourage connections within communities which include Mental Health Hubs and Recovery Cafés. The Third Sector Interface is keen to bring together the third and public sector to develop partnerships. Rurality and workforce issues are prevalent in Argyll and Bute and this event brings a real opportunity to discuss what we can do in our rural communities to support people with mental health issues.

Support in Mind Scotland and the Scottish Rural College have just published: [National Rural Mental Health Survey Scotland: Report of Key Findings](#) on people's experience in rural areas of living with mental health.

Further information

VHS is the national network and intermediary for voluntary health organisations. We welcome new members from all sectors. For more information or to get involved in our work on mental health, contact Kiren Zubairi, Policy Engagement Officer: Kiren.zubairi@vhscotland.org.uk