

# KEY MESSAGES

## MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

### LINKING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

1<sup>st</sup> June 2017, Stirling

Between November 2016 and June 2017 VHS, Support in Mind Scotland and the Open University ran a collaborative programme of seminars and workshops on mental health and social support. The final workshop was in Stirling on 1<sup>st</sup> June, following events in Dundee, Glasgow and Helensburgh. The cross-sectoral mix of delegates in Stirling was less evident than at some previous events, with the 45 delegates drawn mainly from national and local third sector organisations.

This paper summarises key messages from the presentations and discussion in Stirling. The full presentations are available on the VHS website.

#### Dr Jonathan Leach, Open University

Jonathan presented his research: [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.

Jonathan described a typology of social support: friendship, emotional support, constructing meaning, offering practical advice and giving material assistance. If not provided appropriately social support can have risks both for the person providing the social support and the person receiving it. However, social support is generally more intuitive, more open ended and more readily available than clinical interventions. The research suggests that people with mental issues and no social support are more dependent on therapies and formal support.

Jonathan also referred to the [National Rural Mental Health Survey Scotland: Report of Key Findings](#) published in March 2017 by Scotland's Rural College and Support in Mind Scotland. Only thirty eight out two hundred and forty three study respondents with experience of mental health issues had reported that they felt supported in their communities.

The five elements of social support 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. 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. "Sophisticated" comforting messages that focus on people's individual needs and are empathetic. "Non-sophisticated": not listening, being too quick to offer solutions.
3. Constructing meaning: sharing your own lived experience, so that the person being supported may also gain insight, understanding and can make better sense of their own mental health.
4. Practical advice: This is a tricky area as it is harder to give appropriate advice if the advisor does not have the same lived experience or a good understanding of the situation someone is facing.
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:

1. Breach of confidentiality
2. Catastrophising someone's situation, ie reinforcing negativity
3. Disempowering by creating a power imbalance in the relationship
4. Spoiling relationships, e.g. if someone would consider support intrusive/unwished for
5. Inappropriate advice
6. Unclear boundaries or crossing boundaries

### **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 third sector organisations and community groups understand and provide social support but it has been under-valued, misunderstood and ignored as an intervention. Jonathan's work has given SiMS a framework and an authoritative evidence base for the first time. 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 one form of social support and the Scottish Recovery Network has developed six useful principles of peer support. 73% of SiMS staff say that their own lived experience of mental health issues (whether directly or as a carer) influences their work with service users. Their experience is clearly invaluable though it does raise issues for SiMS around personal disclosure which does not happen in formal services. Peer support raises other issues around boundaries: what happens if people share very personal stories but the relationship then breaks down?

### Topics highlighted in discussion

1. How do we explore social support from the perspective of the economics of prevention? What evidence is there to demonstrate that social support interventions prevent crisis and hence save money in terms of GP/clinician time, hospital admission, medications etc.
2. The NHS is still very focused on medical models; the social model of health is not generally/widely understood. Nor did delegates' experience of health and social care partnerships to date give them confidence that this will shift very quickly.
3. The need is increasing because services are closing, or are being concentrated in large hospitals (e.g. Queen Elizabeth University Hospital in Glasgow). It makes it increasingly difficult for people to access services, especially by public transport, and risks isolating them from support even further.
4. How to create much needed sources of social support in unexpected places: e.g. training concierges in high rise flats in suicide prevention.

### Final thoughts: Earth Angels by Leanne McBride of Drumhub

My Uncle Skinny was a bit of Del boy, crossed with  
Jack the lad,  
Always up to no good but never really bad.  
He was the life and soul of the party, anything for a  
laugh  
And he didn't care who was watching or if they  
thought he was daft.  
He would help anybody, give his last dime  
And if you had a problem - Uncle Skinny always had  
the time.  
Nothing was too big, nothing was too small,  
All you had to do was give him a call.  
But something changed, he lost his way,  
He started to think about suicide every day.  
We tried to be there day and night,  
Holding his hand together we'll fight.  
Somehow we lost him, the thoughts got so bad,  
That he felt suicide was the only option he had.  
The morning I found him, hanging by a rope,

I thought this can't be real, it's just one of his jokes.  
As soon as I realise this isn't fake,  
My knees begin to buckle, my heart starts to break.  
My head is screaming No! And Why?  
I can't take the pain - I want to die.  
What if...  
I should have known!  
I'm to blame!  
Are just some of the thoughts going round my brain.  
I felt consumed by darkness, I was losing my way  
But suicide wasn't an option - not after that day.  
Most of us couldn't find the words to explain,  
Others felt embarrassed and thought he brought  
shame.  
I was furious and told them I would never be  
ashamed  
And all those small little minds could share the  
blame  
No one helped me process what I had to see,  
No one heard him - or listened to me.  
Organisations let people fall through gaps,  
Into huge killer, suicide traps.  
If you're reading or hearing these words, I'm asking  
you to see,  
That suicide could easily affect you or me.  
Can we save everybody? I don't know!  
But we have to try!

## 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](mailto:Kiren.zubairi@vhscotland.org.uk)