

An evaluation of the Lambeth & Southwark MIND Peer Support Group – Summary Report



*In society you're labelled and judged. In this group
there is acceptance of you just as you are*

Introduction

This peer support group has been supporting adults who experience distress since February 2012. 45 sessions have taken place, 40 people have attended the group, with an average of 11 participants per group. There is currently a waiting list of 8 people. The group is led by 2 experienced facilitators, who also have lived experience of services.

Lambeth & Southwark MIND commissioned South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust to conduct a brief independent evaluation of the peer support group. The aims were to explore and identify:

1. The need for the peer support group
2. What worked well and why
3. The outcomes participants have achieved as a result of participating in the group

This is a summary report; a full report with detailed methodology and findings is also available.

Methodology

The evaluation was undertaken using a co-productive approach, with a senior researcher from SLAM. It was mutually agreed with the facilitator to conduct a focus group to collect qualitative data and a reflective questionnaire to collect quantitative information regarding outcomes.

The focus group was attended by 7 participants. There was a good balance of gender, age and ethnicity. This report has been read, discussed and validated by the group. Full demographic details are in the main report.

Findings

What is the need for a peer support group?

All participants had experienced stigma, discrimination and rejection due to their mental health problems. Not only from the wider community, but also from family, friends and mental health services.

You're allowed to talk for a minute but most people want the problem to be fixed. 'You look fine, you are fine

Everyone shared a sense of being let down by the mental health system. For some it was falling in a gap between primary and secondary services.

I keep being told to forget about what happened in the past. And I can't! They just don't understand why I don't trust them. I do try to work with them but a wall comes down.

People reported a need for an alternative support structure to express their emotions and to grow within. All agreed a peer led group was the ideal structure, as there was greater understanding and support from people who had experienced similar difficulties.

What works well for the participants – and why?

All participants reported high levels of satisfaction. All felt a strong sense of belonging and offered one another high levels of practical and emotional support. When exploring why the group was effective, the recurring theme was the empathic understanding within an all peer group, being able to speak freely about their experiences, knowing they were not going to be judged. Participants reported they were more likely to take on board suggestions and solutions from people who had lived experienced of mental health services.

Its crucial that groups are peer run, and that the facilitators 'have been there'. There's more understanding, less judgment. It feels safer.

The peer support group is open to anyone who identifies as wanting support with their mental health. This was particularly valued by participants who had struggled to get help from other services.

I find it painful not fitting into a box in the system and not belonging anywhere in. But in the Peer Support group it is about listening and learning rather than fitting into a box.

The group ends with a lunch trip. This emerged as an important element in the effectiveness of the group. It also created a space for informal peer support networks to develop, and friendships to emerge.

There's three settings: The group, the walk to the café, the meal. All three help get to know one another in different way.

One strength frequently commented upon was the skills of the two facilitators. They balanced giving space, acknowledging and responding to distressing personal struggles whilst encouraging solutions to be generated by the group. Having peers as facilitators was useful for the group members, both in terms of recovery and employment prospects.

It's inspiring that service users are facilitating. Gives you hope for change. Proof that it is possible.

The group valued the regular discussions about wider social and political issues. This awareness raising enabled them to contextualise their experiences which in turn made them more resilient to upcoming challenges

It helps us see our struggles in a bigger context. Feels less personal and therefore less painful.

Outcomes

There was consensus amongst the group that like distress, health and social improvements are complex, not necessarily linear, and difficult to attribute to just one activity. However all of the participants identified a number of social gains and health improvements. These are:

Widening social networks

One of the main reasons people wanted to join the peer support group was to address their isolation and alienation. Comments shared in the focus group indicated people's isolation had reduced due to the peer support group. New informal peer support networks had been created.

When you're ill your world becomes very small: eat sleep weep. The group helps me expand my world a little...I have gained new and supportive friends.

Increased coping skills/ resilience

The supportive safe space had enabled people to reflect and work through difficult emotional issues. People were taking control of their own lives. Participants reported an increased sense of control and an increased ability to cope with domestic and bureaucratic life tasks. These increased coping skills, had in turn increased resilience and improved well being.

Number one change is that I'm more in touch with myself, with my emotions. I have grown emotionally and psychologically. I'm more sensitive now and aware of my feelings. The group has facilitated this, in a nutshell!

Raised awareness of Information and Rights

As well as emotional support, peers were able to share practical information regarding welfare rights and other sources of useful information. This raised awareness was having a positive impact on well being.

I've had support re ATOS assessments from group members.

Improved relationships with Mental Health Services

For many, the group was the first time their experiences had been validated and opinions respected. This validation not only led to increased self esteem it also enabled people to have improved relationships with other mental health services.

I'm also better at talking to mental health professionals now because I talk in the group about what happened and is happening. Helps me feel calmer, like I have a backup, a platform.

Improved Feelings of Self worth and Esteem

The validation and emotional support participants received was making a difference to feelings of self worth and self esteem. Participants reported improved feelings of hope, and feeling more confident about their strengths and skills. This enabled them to make positive plans for the future.

The group helps me think about training and paid work.

Outcome Monitoring - Quantitative data

5 out of the 7 participants agreed to complete a questionnaire that asked them to reflect on their well being before and since joining the peer support group

Well being:

- 4 participants reported an improved sense of control in their life,
- 2 people reported improved self esteem
- 4 people said their feelings of hope had increased
- 4 people reported the group had helped them maintain their energy levels
- 3 people reported an improved ability to cope with domestic tasks
- 3 people reported improved ability to cope with bureaucratic tasks

Social Inclusion Activities

- 2 people were volunteering more
- 2 people had started training courses or qualifications
- 1 person had increased their job seeking activities
- 3 people had retained the same amount of paid work
- 2 people had increased their leisure activities
- 3 people were exercising or participating in sports

How could the peer support group be improved and developed?

All participants were happy with how the peer support group was currently running. The participants discussed the balance of increasing the accessibility to new members whilst keeping the size of the group at a level conducive to getting to know and trust others and sharing personal information.

Conclusion

There is a range of compelling evidence here demonstrating the effectiveness of the peer support group. All participants have made health improvements and a range of social and vocational outcomes were achieved. Participants stressed other important outcomes had occurred which were not easily measurable e.g. feeling validated by the group.

Central to the effectiveness is the powerful empathic understanding that derives from being involved in an all peer group. Emerging from this shared understanding is a cohesive group that facilitates significant and reciprocal support. The opportunity to socialise over lunch strengthens this bond, and new friendships and informal peer support structures have emerged.

Everyone spoke highly of the facilitators. Their sensitive style ensures the group is a space where people feel able to explore highly charged emotional issues. Embedded in the group is the core value of co-producing solutions. These solutions are evolving into outcomes for individuals.

Peer support is rapidly gaining recognition and many statutory and voluntary sector mental health services are now planning to upscale peer support. In the group setting there is strength, safety and a sense of control (elements often missing in individual's previous experiences) that comes from being involved in an all peer group. The peer support group can be the model to support people in other peer support roles. The evidence indicates a need to develop and sustain effective groups such as the peer support group at Lambeth and Southwark MIND.

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February 2014