

*This excerpt is taken from the 2005 document “Promoting mental health: A resource for spiritual and pastoral care”*

 THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND  
ARCHBISHOPS'  
COUNCIL



**mentality**

promoting mental health

## Creating a welcoming environment

The event should provide a safe environment for all participants. People need to feel comfortable enough to be honest about their opinions, feelings and possible fears about mental health. However people who use mental health services may feel undermined and invalidated by such a discussion.

The challenge is to create an atmosphere in which people are free to state their beliefs without fear of criticism, and can set their fears aside and enter a process of exploration and growth. Thorough planning before a programme or event and attention to detail during sessions themselves will ensure that, as far as possible, you can concentrate on the dynamic of the group as it unfolds.

## INVOLVING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE USERS

Wherever possible in any training about mental health issues, mental health service users should be involved in planning and participating in the programme. Being involved in an event about mental health offers valuable opportunities to develop the skills, expertise and self-esteem of service users.

Service users are people who have themselves used in-patient, outpatient or primary care services because they experience, or are thought by others to experience, mental distress or mental health problems. Some people reject the term *service user* preferring terms like *survivor*. It is important that sensitivity around language does not become a stumbling block to doing work in this area. People should be able to describe themselves, and be described by others, using words that are acceptable to them.

**Case study:** The Sevenoaks and Area Mental Health Awareness Group asked group participants for feedback on the factors that had had the biggest impact on their views. They identified: - people with personal experience of mental health problems telling their own stories; participative exercises such as *Hearing Voices*, which imaginatively enlarge people's appreciation of and sympathy with others' experiences; involving service users and carers in the presentation team without making it obvious at the outset which roles and what experiences different presenters have; using a mixture of presenting information, generating group discussion, using small group exercises, and telling personal stories to keep the interest and attention going.

The most credible experts are people who have experienced mental health problems. They, together with their families, friends and carers, each have a different story to tell and a different perspective to offer. While they are not a homogenous group, they do share similar experiences. Each has overcome a range of difficulties, including distressing symptoms, receiving a diagnosis and coping with their own feelings about this, as well as the reactions of others. Their willingness to share their experience of how they manage their own mental health can challenge misconceptions and misinformation. Providing people with a safe environment in which to tell their

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stories can be a powerful experience for all concerned. Overwhelmingly people find this an effective way of increasing their understanding of mental health.

There are a number of ways you can plan ahead to enable the best possible contribution from mental health service users.

### Before the event

- Make sure service user involvement is real and meaningful
- Invite service user input into planning and listen to and respect the views given
- Plan to involve at least two or more service users so that they can support each other and do not feel isolated or marginalized
- Ask service users what support they need or want
- Have clear expectations about what you would like service users to do and negotiate their involvement with them
- Resources exist to help services users structure their contributions to make the most use of their personal experiences <sup>1,2</sup>

*I received a call to say there was a mental health awareness discussion group under way in the local parish, and would I be willing to come along next week to give a 'user' perspective. I arrived to find there was only one place left to sit, and that was next to my consultant psychiatrist who had treated me over the last four years. I hadn't realised he was a local Church member. I was the only (declared) service user present and felt very much at a disadvantage and rather patronised.*

### Service User involved in church training event

- Payment should always be offered as a matter of principle, in addition to meeting realistic expenses, including phone calls, photocopying and stationery as required.
- People on benefits may have their payment stopped if a payment breaches their benefit conditions. A booklet published by the **Mental Health Foundation** provides essential guidance to both service users and those who wish to pay them. <sup>3</sup>

### During the event

- Create an environment of mutual understanding and respect in which it feels safe for people to talk about their experiences
- Recognise the common human experience of distress, while acknowledging that each person's experience is unique.
- Be clear that one, or a few, service users cannot speak for all others.
- Avoid seeing people just in terms of their diagnosis
- Be aware of all the personal and social factors that influence a person's mental health
- Set realistic timescales and be considerate about the need for people to take breaks

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*The minister visited our user group to ask our advice about a mental health event she was hoping to hold in her parish. Three of us agreed to get involved, and we met with her over a number of weeks to plan things. Although there wasn't a big budget to cover the event it was agreed we would be paid a fee and our expenses. Two members of the planning group were available to give us support during the day, and after the event we were able to meet with the group to share our views of how it had all gone. The evaluation showed that people had really valued our input and hearing real life experiences and that felt good.*

## Service User group involved in mental health event

### After the event

- At the end of every session, make sure everyone is alright
- Offer an opportunity to debrief afterwards about what the event was like for service users and facilitators
- Welcome input on what went well and what might be different at any future similar event
- Thank the service users for their contribution

### Service user groups and organisations

There are a number of organisations that have networks of local service user groups. They should be able to help you get in touch with service users who will be willing to be involved in the work you are planning. You could arrange to attend a meeting of the group to explain what you are hoping to achieve and to invite them to be involved.

#### Association for Pastoral Care in Mental Health (APCMH)

A UK-wide organisation offering out-of-hour drop-ins, befriending schemes, training courses and awareness raising seminars and conferences. **Contact:** The National APCMH Secretary, c/o St Marylebone Church, Marylebone Road, LONDON NW1 5 LT (01483) 538936 [www.pastoral.org.uk](http://www.pastoral.org.uk)

**UKAN** (UK Advocacy Network) is a national federation of independent patients organisations and service user groups that offers a range of advice, advocacy and awareness-raising activities. **Contact:** 14-18 West Bar Green, Sheffield S1 2DA (0114) 2728171 e: [ukan@can-online.org.uk](mailto:ukan@can-online.org.uk)

**Mind Link** is Mind's national network of mental health service survivors.

Incorporates **Diverse Minds**, which focuses on the needs of black and minority ethnic communities; and **Rural Minds** for people in isolated rural areas. **Contact:** MindinfoLine on 0845 766 0163 or look on the website [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

The **Manic Depression Fellowship** has self help groups across the UK for people living with manic depression - users of mental health services and their carers.

**Contact:** ( 0207) 793 2600 e: [mdf@mdf.org.uk](mailto:mdf@mdf.org.uk) [www.mdf.org.uk](http://www.mdf.org.uk)

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**Survivors Speak Out** is a campaign for psychiatric patients past and present, focusing on human rights and fundamental freedoms against compulsion. It provides information, referrals to other groups, and a newsletter. **Contact:** Survivors Speak Out, 34 Osnaburgh Street, London NW1 3ND (0207) 916 5473

### References

1. Wahl O (1999) *Telling is a risky business: the experience of mental illness stigma*. Rutgers University Press
2. Corrigan P and Lundin R (2000) *Don't call me nuts! Coping with the stigma of mental illness*. Chicago: Recovery Press.
3. *A fair day's pay: a guide to benefits, service user involvement and payments*. (July 2003) London: Mental Health Foundation.