

East Sussex, Brighton & Hove Women's Mental Health Services Development Project

The Women's Services Development Project was formed following growing recognition of the difficulties experienced by both service users and service providers as a result of deficiencies in existing mental health service provision for women.

The project was initially funded by the Department of Health together with East Sussex, Brighton and Hove Health Authority. The development team consisted of one worker from the voluntary sector with experience of setting up and running user influenced, specialist women's mental health services in the community, and one worker from the statutory sector with experience of researching and managing secure and forensic facilities.

A steering group was formed to guide the project. The group consisted of representatives from a broad range of agencies, both statutory and voluntary including practitioners, managers and commissioners, from across both East and West Sussex. Specialist academic supervision and input was arranged through the University of Kent. The steering group identified three key themes for the project to focus on, these were

- To develop a model in conjunction with users for women only day services.
- To explore if the mental health needs of women were being recognised and met in primary care.
- To research the life histories and service use of women with complex needs and make recommendations about how services could be developed and improved for this client group.

One extremely important common theme, which emerged within all three strands of the project was the importance of relationship to women. Women consistently voiced the need to be listened to, to have their experiences validated, to be respected, and to have workers work alongside them towards recovery, empowerment and self responsibility. This was particularly poignant within the context of secure services where women had frequently been re-traumatised and abused by their experiences within the mental health system.

They also noted the importance of a non medical, non institutionalised environment and way of working.

As a result of the findings from the first year of the project, we are currently being funded by the lead mental health PCT for East Sussex to develop two women only units in the area (one medium secure and one in the community). A crucial aspect of service development in this area is the creation of a community service to both support women after discharge and prevent initial admission. The creation of these aspects of service provision go some way towards meeting the criteria recommended in our final report.

The ethos and structure of these services is based upon the findings from the first year of work and is strongly influenced by the expressed experiences and needs of service users both past and present. The assumptions behind this way of working are, that people's behaviour always makes sense within their context, it is important to understand that context and work with that in mind, that people are experts on themselves, and that with appropriate support and input recovery of various degrees is possible.

In addition to actual service development we have produced a comprehensive service model for women only day services and a pack of leaflets for distribution via GP's on a range of issues relating to women and mental health, such as self harm, eating distress, post-natal depression, and domestic violence. We have also begun to deliver training to mental health workers on working with women with complex needs, are organising a conference on women and mental health for local statutory and voluntary organisations and are generally working to raise awareness locally on relevant issues.

Lessons from the first year

- We have been fortunate in having strong support for the project within the PCT's and our immediate management. This was invaluable as there was some resistance to the concept of women only services from some professionals.
- It was also helpful to have a wide membership of the steering group including representatives from the voluntary sector, social services and health and to network widely.
- In order for the project to get 'off the ground' it was crucial to have a 'champion' within existing services, to take the issue of women's mental health forward.
- It was crucial to have a high level of user input to the development of service models.

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