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Pinfold, Vanessa, Sweet, Daryl, Porter, Ian et al. (10 more authors) (2015) Improving community health networks for people with severe mental illness:a case study investigation. Research Report. Health Services and Delivery Research, 3 . National Institute for Health Research: Health Services and Delivery Research , Southampton.

<https://doi.org/10.3310/hsdr03050>

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Improving community health networks for people with severe mental illness: a case study investigation

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Declared competing interests of authors: none

Published February 2015

DOI: 10.3310/hsdr03050

Plain English summary

Improving CHNs for people with severe mental illness

Health Services and Delivery Research 2015; Vol. 3: No. 5

DOI: 10.3310/hsdr03050

NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk

Plain English summary

This research aimed to understand the personal networks of people with severe mental illness (SMI) – connections between people, places and activities – using an approach termed the community health network. The idea was to look at how personal networks were structured, impacts on well-being and the role of practitioners and organisations in accessing resources.

A five-module design was used across two study sites including a patient and public involvement team. Network data were collected from 150 people with SMI and there were 41 follow-up in-depth interviews; 42 organisation stakeholder or leader interviews; and 44 practitioner interviews.

Three types of personal networks were identified in the study sample: diverse and active; family and stable; formal and sparse. All networks included people, places and activity connections. Important factors for well-being included having close relationships and involvement in social and structured activities. Networks were important in shaping people's identity, for example through hobbies, work or relationship roles. Helping people with SMI become motivated to engage in activities was an important role; as one participant emphasised ultimately 'it is down to me' but practitioners can assist the process. Service providers acknowledged personal networks were important for recovery but recognised that the social aspects of supporting SMI, such as friendship and wider connectedness, can get overlooked.

The study identifies potential for people with SMI to become more active managers of their own networks, and roles for practitioner and service systems supporting this process.

Health Services and Delivery Research

ISSN 2050-4349 (Print)

ISSN 2050-4357 (Online)

This journal is a member of and subscribes to the principles of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) (www.publicationethics.org/).

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The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HS&DR programme or one of its preceding programmes as project number 09/1801/1069. The contractual start date was in April 2011. The final report began editorial review in November 2013 and was accepted for publication in May 2014. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HS&DR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

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