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

Vanessa Pinfold,1* Daryl Sweet,1 Ian Porter,2 Cath Quinn,2 Richard Byng,2 Chris Griffiths,3 Julie Billsborough,1 Doyo Gragn Enki,2 Ruth Chandler,4 Martin Webber,5 John Larsen,3 John Carpenter6 and Peter Huxley7

1McPin Foundation, London, UK
2Primary Care Group, Peninsula Schools of Medicine and Dentistry, Plymouth University, Plymouth, UK
3Rethink Mental Illness, London, UK
4Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, West Sussex, UK
5International Centre for Mental Health Social Research, University of York, York, UK
6Department of Social Work and Applied Social Sciences, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK
7Centre for Social Work and Social Care Research, University of Swansea, Swansea, UK

*Corresponding author

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Plain English summary

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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.
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