

Rethink Mental Illness – Barry Lloyd

HoS Themed Briefing – Sport and Mental Health

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- Rethink Mental Illness is a charity that improves the lives of people severely affected by mental illness through local groups and services, expert information and training and successful campaigning.
- A key priority for us is Improving the physical health outcomes for people severely affected by mental illness.
- My area of focus as part of that is the physical activity programme which I lead on and is designed to better understand how to support people living with severe mental illness and their carers to become more active.

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- 10 charities were funded by Sport England as part of Movement for All a subgroup of physical activity leads within the Richmond Group of Charities.
- You may be familiar with the public facing We are Undefeatable campaign which the M4A group sits alongside. This campaign and the M4A group aim to empower people living with various long-term conditions to be more active.

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- Those severely affected by mental illness on average experience worse health outcomes compared to the general population.
- While this does not represent the experience of all those living with a mental illness, UK Government data shows that people living with a severe mental illness demonstrate higher prevalence of preventable physical health conditions such as obesity, stroke, cardiovascular disease, and type 2 diabetes.
- Poorer physical health among those living with severe mental illness has contributed towards what is known as the mortality gap between those living with severe mental illness and the general population.
- This means that people with severe mental illness die on average 20 years younger than the general population, often from preventable physical conditions.
- Our message is that Mental health needs are just as important as physical health needs. We need to support the “whole person”.

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- We are working to reduce this gap and a part of that is our work to increase participation in physical activity for those living with severe mental illness.
- Research shows that, on average, people severely affected by mental illness spend less of their time being active in comparison to the general population.
- Involvement in physical activity among those living with severe mental illness can not only prevent the development of physical health conditions and reduce the mortality gap but can also play a significant role in improving mental wellbeing.
- Physical activity can contribute to improvements in symptoms of mental illness, including mood, alertness, concentration, sleep patterns and psychosis. It can also improve quality of life through social interaction, meaningful use of time, purposeful activity, and empowerment. However, becoming more physically active can be a lot harder and present many more barriers for those living with SMI than those without.
- Evidence from our Physical Activity Programme suggests that peer support is a crucial factor in motivation and encouraging participation in physical activity for people living with SMI.

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- We are near the end of our three-year research project, funded by Sport England, which is evaluating the impact of embedding physical activity into peer support groups for people severely affected by mental illness and their carers.
- In support of efforts to reduce the mortality gap and reduce barriers for people severely affected by mental illness becoming more active with a view to improving wider physical health outcomes.
- Support and enable community organisations to embed physical activity into their current offer or to help them develop a new offer outside of their current groups.
- Creating sustainable opportunities for people to be active through member-led activity choices.

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- The project initially had 3 clear strands, with the 4th being our response over the last year or just under to the pandemic. Obviously like everything this programme has been impacted by the pandemic, so we have refocussed our efforts has seen us focus on supporting individuals, facilitating digital content, and supporting the digitally excluded whilst also maintaining meaningful elements of peer support.

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- For organisations or groups who do look to join our programme we provide our comprehensive toolkit to help steer them in the right direction. This is co-produced with people who have lived experience of various mental illnesses from a range of different diverse communities across England.

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- The thinking was each group would take part in the programme for a year, and to take assessments at baseline, 3, 6, 9 and 12 months, but we are adapting that wherever needed to capture as much data as we can in the delivery time, we have remaining this year, as this has obviously been massively disrupted.
- The interim reports key learning show from baseline to 3 months show that participants:
 - Were more physically active each week.
 - Scored higher in physical and psychological wellbeing questionnaires.
 - Demonstrated increased resilience and confidence.
 - Reported a sense of a better quality of life.
- Obviously, the pandemic has impacted on the collection of data for our evaluation team, but we have applied adapted techniques with varying degrees of success and expect that the final evaluation due later this year will demonstrate further evidence and learnings for us and partners to apply to similar interventions in the future.

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- These are some of the positive experiences captured regarding the impact of physical activity on people severely affected by mental illness who have taken part in this programme.
- Participants have told us that the peer led element of the physical activity groups means they act as a safe space to take part in exercise with like-minded people who understand and share the same challenges.
- As well as this, those taking part also demonstrate higher intrinsic motivation to engage in other types of physical activity outside of their peer support group.
- Co-production of these activities with people severely affected by mental illness, particularly those of different genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and people living with one or more disability, has helped to shape the content of this programme. This has gone some way to

ensure that activities are run in a way that is inclusive of the diverse groups we have involved needs.

- We continue to learn and apply our findings as we continue through the course of this programme.

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- Tackling physical health inequalities experienced by people with Severe Mental Illness will remain a key focus for us.
- There is a great opportunity for the sport and physical activity sector and healthcare sector to work more closely to provide tailored physical activity interventions to prevent and address health inequalities experienced by people severely affected by mental illness.
- The clear relationship between mental and physical health demonstrates the importance of supporting people living with severe mental illness to improve their physical health. This includes supporting people to be more active.
- Co-produced localised interventions that promote peer support in their delivery model, will need to be reviewed further and delivered more widely to support our beneficiaries in a variety of ways that work for them.
- Improving physical activity levels of people with severe mental illness will support the ambitions of Sport England's new strategy as well as London Sports new strategy for 2021 and will also contribute to the NHS Long Term Plan to tackle health inequalities experienced by this group.