

## **Pillar Kincardine Women's Group (Stonehaven)**

### **What is it?**

Funded by Aberdeenshire Council since its inception in May 2013, this Women's Group supports women suffering from mental ill health, by giving them the opportunity to meet with other women with similar experiences and difficulties within a safe environment. Using a peer support approach, women form natural mutual support networks and friendships, helping them find personal solutions to overcome difficulties and better cope with everyday life. It helps women to establish self-management skills, live as independently as possible and increase their quality of life through improved social connectedness and engagement with their community.

### **How does it operate?**

'Peer Supporters' help others in their recovery process by supporting them to connect and engage with the Women's Group, by drawing on their personal lived experiences of mental ill health and how they are now recovering. A focus on peer support and personal development are vital in the delivery of this service. Referral to the Women's Group can happen in three main ways: individuals can self-refer; unpaid carers can refer using referral cards; Aberdeenshire Council, NHS Grampian and voluntary sector organisation can refer using referral forms or referral cards, which are followed up by a risk assessment.

### **What outcomes does it seek to achieve?**

The desired outcomes include increased self-resilience; increased use of healthy coping skills and behaviours when in distress; increased understanding of emotional responses to distress; increased understanding of mental wellbeing; increased capacity to withstand distress; increased confidence; increased sense of wellbeing and improved self-awareness.

### **How are outcomes measured?**

Outcomes are measured through client feedback during and after group sessions (perceived mental health benefits), Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale and completion of a Service Evaluation Form every 6 months. Social interaction and mutual support between participants (within and out with group sessions) is hard to measure but an important part of this model. Measurement of this group is challenging since it involves ongoing day to day activity, which results in subtle and often imperceptibly slow changes for individuals.

### **Key points of learning**

#### **Peer support is an asset based approach to recovery**

- People who have been mentally unwell are an asset for others because of their lived experience and knowledge of what keeps them well. Through peer support we tap into this asset to benefit others.

#### **Peer supporters themselves gain much from their role**

- Being a peer supporter contributes to a person's mental wellbeing. Knowing we are valued by others and able to offer support enhances our own sense of self-worth.

#### **Organisational values are important**

- An organisation offering peer support needs to have an embedded culture of respect for the role of peer supporters and a suitably flexible approach to the individual needs of both supporter and service users. Creating a place of safety for all is crucial.

#### **Person centred approaches are paced according to individual needs**

- Person centred recovery by definition goes at the pace of the individual. For some this can be a lengthy and slow process. However others may respond remarkably quickly when they find themselves in the appropriate nurturing environment.

**Organisational Values** - The overall organisational culture needs to be person centred, open and welcoming with an embedded value base which is very respectful of individuals, their journeys and what they have to offer. Staff need to be well trained, experienced and informed as well as trusting of the process of peer support. Group-work is one way of providing a supportive and encouraging space where individuals can share experiences when they wish. Mutual respect is fundamental to growth and development and the promotion of individual rights and responsibilities is demonstrated in the quality of interaction between members of the group. Relationships form and reform and will naturally change as individuals develop new skills and go through different experiences.

The organisation needs to have an open and flexible culture so that peer supporters can approach staff easily and 'informally' discuss any issues that arise in the course of their involvement with individuals or groups. Staff need to trust peer supporters to engage independently for the most part. However, this depends on the day to day interaction and communication between staff and volunteers within the organisation.

**Peer Support** is built on the premise that individuals with mental health problems are in a very good position to offer support and empathy to others. Pillar Kincardine trusts peer supporters to engage with individuals and groups in ways with which they are comfortable. We believe that service users' recovery is aided by being supported by people whom they trust and who have had similar experiences. It is extremely powerful and encouraging to hear that somebody who has been ill has found a way to recover. Peer supporters share their lived experience to help others find a way through their own challenges, which is both motivating and comforting for others because they realise they are not alone with their struggles and they can see the evidence that overcoming them is possible.

Peer supporters themselves benefit from the support role they provide to others. The knowledge that they have something to offer and can help somebody else to keep well provides positive affirmation of their own self-worth, confidence in themselves and in its turn helps them to maintain good mental wellbeing.

It is an organic process which is enabled by staff however not expected of or imposed on the individuals attending the Women's Group. Group work can enable people to explore issues in a supportive yet potentially dynamic way, and the facilitator's (staff) role is central in setting the scene, tone and content of sessions. Relationships are formed and trust built which can enable individuals to start to open up about their lives. Both listening to how others had dealt with situations and supporting other members of the group has positive effects on the wellbeing of individual's within the group.

There may be no structured or formal training for peer support since it is part of a continuous process of personal development in which people who have been very unwell become increasingly well in themselves and realise that they can encourage and support others to follow in their own journey of recovery. Peer supporters are usually people who seem to share their own experience naturally and encourage others along the path to recovery. We have found that individuals usually know themselves when they are able to provide this kind of support to other service users.

In this context the group work is a mix of structured sessions involving discussion and input around self-management skills, and unstructured sessions to allow mutual peer support to develop naturally which is crucial for the group dynamics. This nourishes the group processes and helps achieve the anticipated outcomes of the group sessions.

Group members decide (with guidance of staff) which subjects might be of interest and have a 'therapeutic' outcome. This is distinct from formal 'therapy' which some of our service users have found to be unhelpful for them and on occasions even threatening. Our approach is specifically person centred and builds on informal encouragement of growth and development for each individual at their own pace. Resilience can be built in adults and linked back to earlier skills and the development of new ways of thinking and therefore doing. Increasing confidence also assists in this process and 'practising' in advance of situations. Sharing

experiences in the group also helps individuals to explore their reactions and speculate about how they might deal with situations in the future.

For those who access services the single most important factor is a feeling of safety. This means being in a safe place and being supported by people whom they trust and who have had similar experiences to themselves. Hearing that somebody who has been ill has found a way through and is willing to share their lived experience can help individuals to start thinking about their own journey and associated challenges. Knowing and seeing that the peer supporter is willing to support them and that they have a fulfilling and meaningful life, gives hope and encouragement that people could do this for themselves.

**Contact**

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