Helping People with Mental Illness

A Mental Health Training Programme for Community Health Workers

Module B

Understanding Mental Illness - Stress and Mental Illness
Helping People with Mental Illness

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Community Health Workers

About this course

This course is designed to help Community Health Workers with some of their day to day work. It was developed after consultation with Community Health Workers, Health and Social Care Forum members, psychiatric nurses and lecturers at the University of Port Elizabeth. We have tried to understand the needs of both community health workers and members of Township communities who suffer from or care for people with mental illness.

We have based the whole course on the idea that people with mental illness are vulnerable to stress. Stress can have a powerful effect on mental health. Helping people with mental health problems and those that care for them to reduce stress can be very helpful indeed. We hope this approach will be useful to Community Health Workers.

The course consists of eight modules on different topics in mental health. There are introduction modules and modules on helping people with their drug treatments, other ways to manage mental health problems and a module on how to assist with tracing people who default from the mental health services. It is possible to design your own course by picking from these modules. It is not necessary to use all eight modules. On the next page we make some suggestions as to how different courses might use the different modules.

The course is a ‘train the trainers’ course so each module contains:

- A plan of each module divided into ‘activities’
- Clear instructions on how to teach the module including resources needed
- A set of full size photocopies of all the slides used to teach the course.

We hope that Community Health Workers in communities, their colleagues and most importantly South Africans with mental health problems gain something positive for themselves from the course. We wish you luck with all your endeavours.

David Richards
Tim Bradshaw
Hilary Mairs
The University of Manchester, UK. November 2003.
Helping People With Mental Illness

Course Outline

There are eight modules in this course. They are:

Module A  What is Mental Illness?
Module A2  Introduction to the Treatment of Mental Health Problems
Module B  Understanding Mental Illness
Module C  Responding to People with Mental Health Problems
Module D  Drug Treatments and Mental Illness
Module E  Helping Families Cope with Mental Health Problems
Module F  Living Well with Mental Health Problems
Module G  Tracing People who Default from Mental Health Services

The course is very flexible. It is not necessary to teach all eight modules. Some modules contain similar material organised in a different way to suit different courses.

Organising a Course

Below are suggestions for three different types of courses:

1. A course to introduce people to some basic knowledge about mental illness and how to talk to people who have mental health problems
   - Modules A, B and C

2. A course to prepare volunteers to assist medical and nursing staff trace people with mental health problems who have defaulted from their clinic appointments
   - Modules A2, C and G

3. A comprehensive course for volunteers who want to work with people with mental illness in the community
   - Modules A, B, C, D, E, F

Each module lasts three or three and a half hours. The instructions are easy to follow and all the materials are included in each pack. Although it is not necessary to take all the modules the ones chosen for any course should be taken in the order above. They can be spaced out over days or weeks or run together over a few days. The materials are designed so that an ordinary person can use them to train other people. You do not have to be an expert to teach this course. However, you should have done the course yourself before you can become a trainer.
Module B

Understanding Mental Illness: Stress and Mental Illness.

Introduction

- This module introduces the idea of stress, sources of stress, the idea that some people have a higher chance of developing mental illness and introduces some ideas about helping people with mental health problems

Purpose

- To gain a better understanding of what causes mental illness
- To consider things that may have a negative effect on the health of people suffering from mental illness
- To discuss how we can help mentally ill people

Materials

- Slides B1 – B8
- Flip chart or chalkboard
- Flip chart pens or chalk
- Pens and Paper
- Handout sheets
- Module B: Definitions Sheet

Activities

Activity 1: Introduction 10 minutes
Activity 2: Stress and Mental Illness 15 minutes
Activity 3: Sources of Stress 45 minutes
Activity 4: Stress and Mental Illness 45 minutes
Activity 5: The ‘Higher Chance’ Model 30 minutes
Activity 6: Helping People with Mental Illness 25 minutes
Activity 7: What Have We Learnt? 10 minutes

Overall Time Needed Three hours
Activity 1: Introduction 10 minutes

Method
- Presentation
Use slide B1 to start the activity

Module B: Understanding Mental Illness - Stress and Mental Illness

Slide B1

Explain that this module is important because it can be very difficult to understand mental illness as there are no obvious external signs such as we can see when someone breaks an arm or leg.

Use slide B2 to outline the aims of the module:

- To gain a better understanding of what causes mental illness
- To consider things that may have a negative effect on the health of people suffering from mental illness
- To discuss how we can help mentally ill people

Slide B2

Explain that often all we see with mentally ill people is changes in their behaviour and in what they say. Without an understanding of the illness it can be hard to know why
the person is behaving in this way and we may start to think they are doing it on purpose and criticise them.

Therefore having a good understanding of mental illness is important if we are to be sympathetic to the person’s problems and help them to recover from their illness.

It is also important to understand mental illness and how stress affects us all if we are going to teach patients and their families more about the illness.
Activity 2: Stress and Mental Illness 15 minutes

Methods
- Presentation
- Large Group Discussion

This activity is used to explain the factors that make people vulnerable to mental illness and what may trigger this vulnerability. It is also a useful module to get the group talking about mental illness.

1. Use slide B3 to introduce some basic ideas about mental illness:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding Mental Illness (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Some people have a <strong>higher chance</strong> of becoming mentally ill than others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• These people normally become <strong>mentally ill</strong> when they have been under high levels of stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Stress can be considered two ways:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Acute stress - bereavement, losing a job etc… this is sometimes referred to as stress resulting from <strong>life events</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Chronic stress - results from things such as unhappy relationships, not having enough money etc….</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Use questions to help participants to explore their understanding of the terms that are used, particularly those in *italics*. Ask participants what they think these terms mean. Good questions to use might be:

Q1 – What do I mean by **higher chance**?
Q2 – What do we mean by **stress**?
Q3 – What types of things cause stress for people?
Q4 – How do people react when exposed to stress?
Q5 – Give me an example of an **acute stress** and a **chronic stress**?
Q6 – What do you think is the difference between the two?
Q7 – Could you be exposed to both types of stress at the same time?

3. Summarise the activity by using the definitions sheet provided to remind you of the definitions of these terms and explaining them to participants.
Activity 3: Sources of Stress 45 minutes

Method
• Small Group Work

1. Ask the participants to organise themselves into groups of about 6 to 8 people.

2. Once they have done this tell them to discuss what things they think are stressful about life in the local community and tell them that one of them should write down their ideas (they have 20 minutes to do this).

3. After 20 minutes go round each group and ask them to call out one thing that they think is stressful about life in the local community.

4. The teacher should write down all the ideas that are provided, trying to list them in two columns under the headings of acute stress and chronic stress.

5. Keep going round the groups until all ideas have been exhausted. Keep the list of things that are stressful for use in activity 6. At the end summarise what you have written down by talking to the group about the lists.
Activity 4: Stress and Mental Illness 45 minutes

Methods
• Presentation
• Large Group Discussion

1. Use slide B4 to help participants to explore their understanding of some of the terms in *italics*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding Mental Illness (2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• When a person who has a higher chance of mental illness experiences enough stress they will begin to show <em>symptoms of the illness</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Symptoms may include hearing voices, expressing odd ideas, being agitated or over-active, confusion, low mood, having no energy etc….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It may be difficult for family and friends to understand that the person is ill because all they see is someone behaving oddly or saying strange things</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Slide B4*

2. Use questions again to and to stimulate discussion. Example of questions may be:

Q1 – What do we mean by *symptoms of mental illness*?
Q2 – What do you think it must be like to hear a voice speak to you when you are alone?
Q3 – Where might you think the voice was coming from?
Q4 – If the voice threatened you or your family, how would you feel and how might you behave?
Q5 – What type of behaviour might the patient exhibit that the family might find difficult to understand?
Q6 – Without explanations from someone else about the patient’s behaviour, why might they think the patient was behaving this way and how might they respond towards them?
Move onto slide B5.

**Understanding Mental Illness (3)**

- If a person has had mental illness they have a much higher chance of becoming ill again.

- In addition to the types of stress that led to the person becoming ill in the first place they may experience additional stresses as a result of the illness itself e.g. loss of self confidence, loss of status, loss of job, homelessness, teasing by the community, criticism, rejection etc…

- We call this type of stress *secondary stress* because it is caused by the illness itself.

*Slide B5*

Again use questions to explore what the information on slide B5 mean to participants. E.g.:

Question - How does mental illness affect people lives in a way that the illness itself might cause the person more stress?

3. Summarise the activity by explaining how stress can cause mental illness in people with a higher chance of mental illness but is also a result of their illness. People can become more ill because of this extra stress.
Activity 5: The ‘Higher Chance’ Model 30 minutes

Methods
- Presentation
- Large group Discussion

1. Present slide B6 to participants.

**Understanding mental illness (4)**

[Diagram of the model]

*Person with higher chance of mental illness* + *Stress* = *Symptoms of mental illness* → *More Stress*

_Slide B6_

Explain this slide by going through the model and explain each part in turn. Start with the relationship between higher chance and stress and how this may trigger the symptoms of illness.

Explain how acute and chronic stress may cause a person who has been ill to become ill again and that this will lead to a worse illness for that person.
2. Ask the group what the diagram suggests about how we might help people suffering from mental illness to have less chance of becoming ill again. Try to get them to generate useful ideas.

*The overall answer to this question is on slide B7:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helping people with mental illness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Reducing stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increasing a person’s ability to cope with mental illness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Slide B7*

3. Summarise this activity by explaining that the course will be using the higher chance model to help participants with their work as community health workers when they have to see people with mental illness.
Activity 6: Helping People With Mental Illness  25 minutes

Method
- Small Group Work

1. Ask the participants to get back in to their original groups of 6.

2. Ask them to discuss how they think they can help people suffering from mental illness living in the local community. Tell them to consider the three areas of secondary stress and to think how they can help people to reduce the stress they are exposed in these areas (they have 15 minutes to do this).

3. After 15 minutes go round each group and ask them to call out one way in which they think they may help people with mental illness.

4. The teacher should write down all ideas on a flip chart or chalkboard.

5. Slide B8 presents some ideas to help people with mental illness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helping People with Mental Illness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage them to continue with medication as this will protect them against the potentially harmful effects of stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Try to reduce secondary stress by helping them to adjust to the effects of the illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work with their family and the community to help them to support the patient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Support them to sort out any problems they may have that are causing them stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Avoid becoming angry or critical of them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Avoid being too protective and treating them like children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Slide B8

Go through the slide fairly quickly without too much discussion and use it as a summary of ideas the participants came up with.
Activity 7: What Have We Learnt? 10 minutes

Method

• Large Group Discussion

1. Ask participants to say what they have learned from the whole of module B.

2. Do not discuss the individual contributions at this stage. Allow individual participants to say whatever they wish about the module.

3. Write each contribution down on a flipchart or chalkboard.

4. Summarise the groups’ suggestions at the end. Feedback what the group have said and end on a positive note.

5. Take a well earned break.
Module B: Understanding Mental Illness: Stress and Mental Illness

A model for understanding mental illness
This model helps us understand what causes mental illness and what happens to people with mental illnesses.

It is useful for explaining the illness to patients and their families and helps us decide what may be helpful things to do for people with mental illnesses.

Higher chance
Although we don’t know why a person becomes mentally ill – we know that some people have a higher chance of developing mental illnesses than other people. Some things that may increase this chance include a family history of mental illness, head injuries or being physically or sexually abused.

Also under certain conditions such as not sleeping for a long time, being isolated and very afraid people are more likely to experience symptoms of mental illness.

Stress
At certain times in our lives stress is something that we all can experience in response to things that happen to us – although there are differences in what people find stressful and how they cope, examples of stress might include housing problems, debts, death of family members etc.

Stresses in people who have a higher chance of developing of mental illness (particularly those who have already had mental illness) may cause symptoms of mental illness. These include effects upon a person’s mood and may make them feel nervous or sad. In the most serious mental illnesses often referred to as ‘psychotic illness’ people may experience a wide range of symptoms, the most common are know as ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ symptoms.

Positive symptoms include:
  • strange beliefs that are not shared by others such as believing you are God or the Devil these beliefs are called delusions
  • unusual sensory experiences such as seeing or hearing things that are not really there but nevertheless seem real to the person experiencing them, these are called hallucinations
  • disturbances in thinking that may cause the person to speak very quickly or in a way that it is difficult to make sense of your they are saying

These symptoms are normally associated with disturbances in the person’s behaviour that may appear odd or senseless to those who know them.
The other group of important symptoms are known as ‘negative symptoms’ and these may include:

- lack of energy and motivation
- poor attention to appearance and personal hygiene
- lack of facial expression of emotion
- a reduction in the amount the person speaks
- tiredness and lethargy

Negative symptoms are very difficult to understand and family members often do not recognise them as part of the illness instead believing that the person is being idle or lazy. These symptoms in turn may increase stress for both the person with them and their family.

Once a person has had symptoms of mental illness they have a higher chance of having mental illness again in the future. Therefore helping reduce the chance of developing mental illness (for example by taking medication) and coping better with the effects of stress can be positive for people with mental health problems.

All of the suggested ways of working with people with mental health problems in this handbook are based upon this stress/higher chance understanding of mental illness.
Module B:
Understanding Mental Illness - Stress and Mental Illness
Aims of the session

- To gain a better understanding of what causes mental illness
- To consider things that may have a negative effect on the health of people suffering from mental illness
- To discuss how we can help mentally ill people
Understanding Mental Illness (1)

• People who experience severe forms of mental illness have a *higher chance* of developing the illness

• Such people normally become *mentally ill* when they have been under high levels of *stress*

• Stress can be considered two ways
  – 1. Acute stress - bereavement, losing a job etc… this is sometimes referred to as stress resulting from *life events*
  – 2. Chronic stress - results from things such as unhappy relationships, not having enough money etc….
• When a person who has a higher chance of mental illness is exposed to enough stress they will begin to show *symptoms of the illness*

• Symptoms may include hearing voices, expressing odd ideas, being agitated or over-active, confusion, low mood, having no energy etc….

• It may be difficult for family and friends to understand that the person is ill because all they see is someone behaving oddly or saying strange things
Understanding Mental Illness (3)

- If a person has had mental illness they have a higher chance of becoming ill again.

- In addition to the types of stress that led to the person becoming ill in the first place they may now be exposed to additional stresses as a result of the illness itself e.g. loss of self confidence, loss of status, loss of job, homelessness, teasing by the community, criticism, rejection etc…

- We call this type of stress *secondary stress* because it is caused by the illness itself.
Understanding mental illness (4)

Higher Chance

\[ \text{Stress} \]

= 

Symptoms of More mental illness stress
Helping people with mental illness

- Reducing stress

- Increasing ability to cope with stress
Helping people with Mental Illness

• Encourage them to continue with medication as this will protect them against the potentially harmful effects of stress
• Try to reduce stress by helping them to adjust to the effects of the illness and by working with their family and the community to help them to support the patient
• Support them to sort out any problems they may have that are causing them stress
• Avoid becoming angry or critical of them
• Avoid being too protective and treating them like children