

Oldham



Local Involvement Network



'Self Help'

The role of self help groups within mental health.

The importance of maintaining and supporting the self help groups in Oldham.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Context

Following the announcement at the OMBC Budget Workshop in November 2010 where the closure of 3 mental health day centres were announced, service users and mental health representatives approached the LINK with their concerns about the issue. This initiated a consultation process with members of their groups from which a number of key issues were raised, and again at Local Authority consultation sessions. This report outlines the findings from this consultation and supports this with a theoretical frame from which the Local Authority should consider its proposals. As per the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act (2007) and in accordance with Part 2, Section 5 of the Local Involvement Networks Regulations 2008, this constitutes a formal LINK report and set of recommendations and as such requires a formal response from OMBC and must be considered as part of any commissioning decisions that are to be taken in relation to the services referenced.

1.2 The History

In 1935 Alcoholics Anonymous was started and the concept of self help groups has grown since then. Many groups are not really self help and may be better described as 'peer support', and this is an important distinction as groups may be criticised for what they don't do rather than being valued for the actual things that they do. Some groups may be better described as 'user led'. The



George Carlin observed that there is "no such thing" as self-help: anyone looking for help from someone else doesn't technically get "self" help

traditional view of a self help group is that of a group that supports someone to deal with their specific issue, such as alcoholism, or a specific medical disorder. However sometimes people have issues that although related to their 'diagnosis' are actually more generic in nature. This can be things such as low

mood, loss of confidence, and a need for social interaction. Groups that are meeting these needs may not be seen as 'self help' groups, but their functions can be more important to people's recovery and wellbeing than those that just focus on the 'illness'.

A distinction needs to be made about self help groups and support groups. It is perhaps more appropriate to consider some of the self help groups as support groups, as the people that use them would struggle to run the group themselves, independently.

Self Help Group member

2.The Effectiveness of Self Help Groups

2.1 Behaviour Control and Stress Coping Groups

Of Individual Therapy groups, researchers distinguish between Behaviour Control groups (such as Alcoholics Anonymous and TOPS) and Stress Coping groups (such as mental health support groups, cancer patient support groups, and groups of single parents). [1] German researchers refer to Stress Coping groups as Conversation Circles. [2]

Significant differences exist between Behavioural Control groups and Stress Coping groups. Meetings of Behaviour Control groups tend to be significantly larger than Stress Coping counterparts (by more than a factor of two). Behaviour Control group members have a longer average group tenure than members of Stress Coping groups (45 months compared to 11 months), and are less likely to consider their membership as temporary. While very few members of either set saw professionals concurrently while being active in their group, Stress Coping members were more likely to have previously seen professionals than Behaviour Control group members. Similarly, Stress Coping groups worked closer with mental health professionals. [1] [3]

2.2 Talking Groups

In Germany a specific subset of Conversation Circles are categorized as Talking Groups. In Talking Groups all members of the group have the same rights, each member is responsible only for themselves (group members do not make decisions for other group members), each group is autonomous, everyone attends the group on account of their own problems, whatever is discussed in the group remains confidential, and participation is free of charge. [2]

2.3 Affiliation and lifespan

If self-help groups are not affiliated with a national organization, professional involvement increases their life expectancy. [4] Conversely, if particular groups are affiliated with a national organization professional involvement decreases their life expectancy. Rules enforcing self-

regulation in Talking Groups are essential for the group's effectiveness. [2]

2.4 Group processes

No two self-help groups are exactly alike, the make-up and attitudes are influenced by the group ideology and environment. [5] In most cases, the group becomes a miniature society that can function like a buffer between the members and the rest of the world. [6] The most essential processes are those that meet personal and social needs in an environment of safety and simplicity. Elegant theoretical formulations, systematic behavioural techniques, and complicated cognitive-restructuring methods are not necessary. [3]

Despite the differences, researchers have identified many psychosocial processes occurring in self-help groups related to their effectiveness. This list includes, but is not limited to: acceptance, behavioural rehearsal, changing member's perspectives of themselves, changing member's perspectives of the world, catharsis, extinction, role modelling, learning new coping strategies, mutual affirmation, personal goal setting, instilling hope, justification, normalization, positive reinforcement, reducing social isolation, reducing stigma, self-disclosure, sharing (or "opening up"), and showing empathy. [2] [3] [5] [6] [7] [8] [9]

Five theoretical frameworks have been used in attempts to explain the effectiveness of self-help groups. [7]

1. **Social support:** Having a community of people to give physical and emotional comfort, people who love and care, is a moderating factor in the development of psychological and physical disease.
2. **Experiential knowledge:** Members obtain specialized information and perspectives that other members have obtained through living with severe mental illness. Validation of their approaches to problems increases their confidence.
3. **Social learning theory:** Members with experience become creditable role models.
4. **Social comparison theory:** Individuals with similar mental illness are attracted to each other in order to establish a sense of

normalcy for themselves. Comparing one another to each other is considered to provide other peers with an incentive to change for the better either through upward comparison (looking up to someone as a role model) or downward comparison (seeing an example of how debilitating mental illness can be).

5. **Helper theory:** Those helping each other feel greater interpersonal competence from changing other's lives for the better. The helpers feel they have gained as much as they have given to others. The helpers receive "personalized learning" from working with helpers. The helpers' self-esteem improves with the social approval received from those they have helped, putting them at a more advantageous position to help others.

A framework derived from common themes in empirical data describes recovery as a contextual nonlinear process, a trend of general improvement with unavoidable paroxysms while negotiating environmental, socio-economic and internal forces, motivated by a drive to move forward in one's life. The framework identified several negotiation strategies, some designed to accommodate illnesses and others designed to change thinking and behaviour. The former category includes strategies such as acceptance and balancing activities. The latter includes positive thinking, increasing one's own personal agency/control and activism within the mental health system. [10]

2.5 Relationship with mental health professionals

A 1978 survey of mental health professionals in the United States found they had a relatively favourable opinion of self-help groups and there was a hospitable climate for integration and cooperation with self-help groups in the mental health delivery system. [11] The role of self-help groups in instilling hope, facilitating coping, and improving the quality of life of their members is now widely accepted in many areas both inside and outside of the general medical community. [5]

A survey of psychotherapists in Germany found that 50% of the respondents reported a high or very high acceptance of self-help groups and 43.2% rated their acceptance of self-help groups as moderate. Only

6.8% of respondents rated their acceptance of self-help groups as low or very low. [12]

Surveys of self-help groups have shown very little evidence of antagonism towards mental health professionals. [9] The maxim of self-help groups in the United States is "Doctors know better than we do how a sickness can be treated. We know better than doctors how sick people can be treated as humans." [2]

2.6 Referrals

Professional referrals to self-help groups for mental health are less effective than arranging for prospective self-help members to meet with veterans of the self-help group. This is true even when compared to referrals from professionals familiar with the self-help group when referring clients to it. [8] Referrals mostly come from informal sources (e.g. family, friends, word of mouth, self). Those attending groups as a result of professional referrals account for only one fifth to one third of the population. [5] One survey found 54% of members learned about their self-help group from the media, 40% learned about their group from friends and relatives, and relatively few learned about them from professional referrals. [1]

2.7 Effectiveness

Self-help groups are effective for helping people cope with, and recover from, a wide variety of problems. [7] [14] German Talking Groups have been shown to be as effective as psychoanalytically oriented group therapy. [2] [15] Effects of 12-step programs exceed those of cognitive-behavioural inpatient programs. [16] Participation in self-help groups for mental health is correlated with reductions in psychiatric hospitalisations, and shorter hospitalisations if they occur. Members demonstrate improved coping skills, greater acceptance of their illness, improved medication adherence, decreased levels of worry, higher satisfaction with their health, improved daily functioning and improved illness management. Participation in self-help groups for mental health encourages more appropriate use of professional services, making the time spent in care more efficient. The amount of time spent in the

programs, and how proactive the members are in them, has also been correlated with increased benefits. [7] [8] Decreased hospitalisation and shorter durations of hospitalization indicate that self-help groups result in financial savings for the health care system, as hospitalisation is one of the most expensive mental health services. Similarly, reduced utilization of other mental health services may translate into additional savings for the system. [7]

While self-help groups for mental health increase self-esteem, reduce stigma, accelerate rehabilitation, improve decision-making, decrease tendency to decompensate under stress, and improve social functioning, they are not always shown to reduce psychiatric symptomatology. [5] [6] [17] The therapeutic effects are attributed to the increased social support, sense of community, education and personal empowerment. [18] [19] [20]

Members of self-help groups for mental health rated their perception of the group's effectiveness on average at 4.3 on a 5-point Likert scale. [1]

2.8 Criticism

There are several limitations of self-help groups for mental health, including but not limited to their inability to keep detailed records, lack of formal procedures to follow-up with members, absence of formal screening procedures for new members, lack formal leadership training, and likely inability of members to recognize a "newcomer" presenting with a serious illness requiring immediate treatment. Additionally, there is a lack of professional or legal regulatory constraints determining how such groups can operate, there is a danger that members may disregard the advice of mental health professionals, and there can be an anti-therapeutic suppression of ambivalence and hostility. [6] [13]

3. The Oldham Situation

3.1 Rock Street

In response to one of the criticisms of self groups, it is often thought by service users that they are good at recognising someone's poor health, but that they struggle to find professionals to talk to, and when they do there is sometimes a feeling that the professionals have not listened. This feeling may be unfair as professionals are not likely to feedback their response due to confidentiality. It is interesting though that within the criticisms of self help groups they talk about a lack of skills and procedures that are actually performed by the Hollies Resource Team in Oldham on behalf of the groups at Rock Street.

There are current proposals around the remodelling of services which may affect the self help groups at Rock Street. This could be a good opportunity to review the current status of groups, to look at their needs, and to offer them other kinds of support such as online advertising. Generally there will be a need to look at all websites, posters and other

Rock Street: The Current Services

"We have found that people benefit greatly from our self help groups and workshops on various alternative therapies and mental health issues. We currently have around 20 self help groups, with new ones being set up as needed. Our project workers encourage groups to support themselves. However staff support is provided when needed.

The groups are sometimes gender or age specific or are aimed at a certain group of people, other groups are open to anyone. All our groups are for over 18s.

The groups are not drop in sessions, so if you are interested in joining any of our self help groups, please make an appointment for one of our information afternoons. Information afternoons take place on Tuesdays between 1.30–3pm and you can make an appointment by calling 0161 770 8500. One of our project workers will meet you privately and will assess your needs. They will refer you to a suitable group or signpost you to other services. We also have a small resource library where you can find information, leaflets and DVDs on mental health, in a variety of languages. If you would like more information about our services, or about how we can support you, please feel free to contact us."

information around all services in Oldham as there are likely to be many changes taking place. It is often the case then when something disappears that there is no-one left to tell people that groups and services are no longer operating and that the details need to be removed from websites, posters taken down and leaflets removed.

If groups need to relocate then it will be important to advertise their new locations. This may also require some thought around 'contacts', especially as some of the proposed cuts are targeted at the staff who currently support many of the self help groups. This will however be a good opportunity to advertise for new members and develop a stronger web presence for the groups.

3.2 The Centre for Independent Living (CIL)

The Centre for Independent Living (CIL) is a key player in the future around user led groups. The Link Centre is the proposed CIL within Oldham but is already practically full to capacity in respect of the number of groups that it can host. This could mean that groups looking for a place to meet, or to relocate, may not have the option of the CIL but also may be unable to access support from the CIL. A possible solution to this could be to find a building suitable for self help groups and set it up as an extension of the CIL. There is though a move to encourage groups to move into communities and into more local and accessible buildings. However this needs to be looked at in respect of whether there is enough local demand to sustain a group, and also needs to consider whether people with mental health issues would actually wish to access a group in their community. Many people with mental health problems feel isolated within their communities, and also do not want to be identified within those communities because of the fear around the stigma of mental illness.

3.3 The Role of the Groups

People need services that are accessible to them at the point they are at in their lives. Those who are not ready for employment for instance may require a more low key level of support to enable them to progress to the point where they are able to consider employment as an option.

While not everyone will reach that point there may be a number of people who could develop their potential if they have the necessary support. The existing self help groups are not just about helping people deal with their illness. They also look at dealing with social isolation, increasing confidence and self esteem, which are all important factors in wellbeing. They help with stability and providing a platform for people to further develop.

“Moving out is not the same as moving on, and staying in is not the same as staying still.”

A Service User

There is a risk that groups end up keeping people in services, in much the same way as old style day services. However this risk is actually increased by services not connecting to groups. If groups are not supported by referrals and information then they have a greater risk of becoming static. Self help groups can also support people when they have returned to employment. Problems with social isolation are not always solved by being in work, and often work can provide stresses that require additional support at a time when many other services are no longer available.

3.4 Transitional Support

The groups at Rock Street are concerned about the possibility of having to relocate, and the strain that this could put on group members which might place the survival of the group at risk. Some groups only have ‘unofficial’ group leaders who may be either unwilling or unable to shoulder the burden of taking control of the group’s relocation. A request has been made for support to be made available to help groups make this proposed relocation. This support would probably include finding a new place to

Due acknowledgement from OMBC must be given about what this would require and the implications of placing this responsibility on mental health service users already struggling to manage their health and wellbeing via making use of the groups in the first instance.

Self Help Group member

Consideration needs to be given to the type of transitional support required to enable existing self help/support groups to become independent.

Self Help Group member

meet, advertising the new location, and helping the group settle in to the new location. If such support is made available then the group would probably discuss their specific needs with the person providing the help.

3.5 Ongoing Support

Concern has been expressed by self help group members around the impact of the loss of ongoing support on the sustainability of groups. Some groups do not have a designated 'leader' and rely on the support currently available to ensure that the groups remain

How willing or what is the indication from the NHS to support self help/support groups in the way OMBC describes and to use their buildings?

Self Help Group member

Initial independent consultation has highlighted that this type of low-level preventative support is crucial for their recovery and maintenance of their wellbeing and that groups would worry for the survival of the group without external support.

Self Help Group member

running without being reliant on one person to organise the meetings and whatever else is required. The movement to a new location is seen as a key point of risk that requires additional support, but members feel that some groups will require continuing access to help. Further research needs to take place to ascertain the level and nature of support required by each group, and perhaps whether some of this may be accessible at the potential new location.

4. The Big Society

The concept of the 'Big Society' has been introduced by the government to devolve power to communities, support charities and similar organisations, and to encourage volunteering and the notion of citizenship. We have listed below some of the elements of the Big Society aims (taken from the government proposals) that we feel most clearly relate to recognising the importance and current relevance of 'self help groups'.

1. "Give communities more powers"

- "We will introduce new powers to help communities save local facilities and services threatened with closure"
- "We will train a new generation of community organisers and support the creation of neighbourhood groups across the UK, especially in the most deprived areas."

Building the Big Society

We want to give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want. We want society – the families, networks, neighbourhoods and communities that form the fabric of so much of our everyday lives – to be bigger and stronger than ever before. Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all. Building this Big Society isn't just the responsibility of just one or two departments. It is the responsibility of every department of Government, and the responsibility of every citizen too. Government on its own cannot fix every problem. We are all in this together. We need to draw on the skills and expertise of people across the country as we respond to the social, political and economic challenges Britain faces.

2. “Encourage people to take an active role in their communities”

- “We will take a range of measures to encourage volunteering and involvement in social action, including launching a national ‘Big Society Day’.”
- “We will introduce a National Citizen Service. The initial flagship project will provide a programme for 16 year olds to give them a chance to develop the skills needed to be active and responsible citizens, mix with people from different backgrounds, and start getting involved in their communities.”

3. “Transfer power from central to local government”

- “We will promote the radical devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to local government, including a full review of local government finance.”

4. “Support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises”

- “We will use funds from dormant bank accounts to establish a Big Society Bank, which will provide new finance for neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and other nongovernmental bodies.”

The future plans would suggest that there will be more emphasis on the development of such things as self help groups and therefore we need to look at not just supporting the existing groups but also review how new groups are helped to be formed and developed.

Experience of speaking to clinicians about PTSD has proved difficult and that there does not in fact appear to be a great level of expertise amongst local GP's and clinicians.

Self Help Group member

Appendix 1: The Self Help Groups

Unless otherwise stated, all groups meet at the Rock Street Resource Centre.

Mondays

Tranx (Tranquilliser Addicts) 10.30am – 1pm

An independently run group to support people recovering from addiction to prescription drugs.

Art Group 1 – 4pm

Explores different art methods such as painting, weaving, pottery, and modelling. The group meets at Gallery Oldham.

Punjabi Women's Group 1.30 – 3.30pm

A self-help support group for Asian women, aimed at those who are over 30.

The Millon Group meets at the Coppice Community Centre.

Women's Group 1.30 – 3.30pm

A self help group for women of any age and race to make new friends and gain confidence. Come along for discussions, cookery, confidence building, meditation, a friendly chat and a brew.

SAFE Group (Safe And Friendly Environment) 2 – 3.30pm

A self help group for women aged 50 plus for friendship with like minded women.

One to one counselling 5 – 9pm

Independently run counselling sessions supported by voluntary donations.

To make an appointment call 0161 624 9141 and leave a message

Tuesdays

Urja (Gujarati Women) 10am – 12pm

A self help group for Gujarati women over 40 years old.

Gamblers Anonymous 7 – 9pm

Independently run support group for people wanting to stop a gambling addiction.

[Gam Anon 7 – 9pm](#)

Independently run support group for friends and family of people with a gambling addiction.

Wednesday

[Creative Writing Group 10.30am – 12pm](#)

Uses writing in a therapeutic way by writing personal life experiences and using traditional literature to write scripts.

[Men's self help group 12.30 – 2.30pm](#)

Support group for men of any race over 18 years old.

[Hearing Voices 1 – 3pm \(alternate weeks\)](#)

Support group for people who are distressed by hearing voices. The group meets at Chadderton Court.

[OCD Obsessive Compulsive Disorder 2.30 – 4.30pm](#)

Self help support group for people suffering with obsessions and compulsions.

[Alcoholics Anonymous 7 – 9pm](#)

Independently run support group for people wanting to stop an alcohol addiction.

[Al Anon 7pm – 9pm](#)

Independently run support group for friends and family of people with a alcohol addiction.

[Shield \(Self Help in Everyday Living Distress\) 8 – 10pm](#)

Self help group that helps people who are over 18 years old develop confidence in their day to day life. Provides support for people who have had, or who presently have mental health problems.

Thursday

[Walking for Health 1.30 – 3.30pm](#)

A walking group who go out locally for fresh air and exercise, and to make friends.

[Asian Men's Project 2.30 – 4.30pm](#)

The project is designed to encourage Asian men to participate with project activities and programmes. Also to support each other and

exchange information, along with the opportunity to enjoy interaction and socialising. The group meets at Coppice Community Centre.

[Side by Side Counselling 5 – 9pm](#)

Independently run counselling sessions supported by voluntary donations. To make an appointment call 0161 626 6770 and leave a message.

Friday

[Meditation 10am – 12pm](#)

Using meditation and relaxation techniques to help manage mental health issues and stress.

[Green Fingers Group 1 – 4pm](#)

A practical hands on gardening group who also learn about health eating as well as garden maintenance and growing your own fruit and vegetables.

[Friday Fellowship 1 – 3.30pm](#)

A self help mixed gender group of like minded people with similar life experiences. Offers support to group members to help gain self esteem and confidence.

[One to one counselling 5 – 9pm](#)

Independently run counselling sessions supported by voluntary donations.

To make an appointment call 0161 624 9141 and leave a message

Saturday

[Saturday Social 7 – 9pm](#)

A social group run by service users for other service users, it's a time to enjoy socialising and some supper. No alcohol.

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