

Learning Principles

Supporting learners who have experience of mental health problems



The needs of individual learners with experience of mental health problems who want to participate in learning and employment opportunities in Scotland vary significantly as can the way in which they are able to access the training and support they require.

According to The World Health Organisation, up to one in four people will suffer from a mental health problem at some time in their lives

This paper describes some of the issues and barriers to learning and suggests practical ways of providing support that will increase the chances of a successful outcome for an individual engaging with learning and employment opportunities in their community.

According to The World Health Organisation, up to one in four people will suffer from a mental health problem at some time in their lives. This means that we are all likely either to face such problems ourselves, or to know a friend, colleague or family member who does. It also means that a significant number of the learners that we support will also experience a mental health problem.

Most of us are familiar with the term 'mental health problems', but actually understanding what they are can be a different matter. Some of the most common mental health problems are depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, schizophrenia, eating disorders, self-harm and suicidal thoughts and feelings.

It would be easy if there was one root cause of mental health problems but there seem to be a number of factors that can contribute in varying degrees. These include our past experiences, genetics, surroundings, the way we live our lives, trauma and stress.

It is important to remember that having a mental health problem need not be long term. With the right help and support, people can and do recover from even the most severe mental health problems. People who talk about their own recovery often mention the importance of being 'in control' – of taking an active part in their own recovery, well-being and about having hope and aspirations for the future. Learning and employment plays a significant role in this for many individuals with mental health problems.

Recovery means different things to different people. Recovery does not mean someone having to be symptom-free or illness-free. Recovery in mental health is usually thought of as being able to live a full and satisfying life whilst perhaps experiencing a mental health problem.

A widely used definition of recovery is:

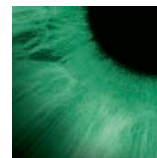
Recovery is happening when people can live well in the presence or absence of mental health problems and the many losses that come in their wake, such as isolation, poverty, unemployment and discrimination. Recovery does not always mean that people will return to full health or retrieve all their losses, but it does mean that people can live well in spite of them.¹

Learning Centre staff may come into contact with a learner with a mental health problem in a variety of situations:

- a new learner with a mental health problem may access a centre
- an existing learner may start to experience difficulties in relation to their mental health
- a learner who had their education or employment interrupted by a period of mental ill health may wish to re-engage with learning or employment.

The support required in each of these situations varies and will very much depend on the individual. It is important to remember that their needs can fluctuate. An individual in each situation may be coping well with their symptoms but equally may be or become unwell and require additional support.

Supporting learners who have experience of mental health problems



Mental health problems are characterised by changes in mood and behaviour. When unwell, some people may become reclusive, unhappy or withdrawn, whilst others may do the opposite and become unusually sociable and uninhibited. Sometimes people with a mental health problem might get confused about what is real and what is not. They may hear or see things that other people don't and they may have beliefs that seem peculiar to others. When an individual's emotions become extreme, or start to dominate their lives, they may need help and support. This is where Learning Centre Staff have a key role in supporting learners to overcome difficulties and enable a learner to engage with or continue with their learning wherever possible.

Participation in learning can have a positive effect on an individual's mental health if the correct support and resources are provided. These benefits include:

- learning new skills or regaining skills
- increased confidence and self-esteem
- a positive outlook and goals to focus on
- increased social networks
- having a routine and purpose
- providing a step towards recovery

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Overcoming the Barriers

Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is one of the biggest barriers to a learner with experience of a mental health problem engaging successfully with learning. This can be for a number of reasons including:

- lack of self-belief in own potential
- fear of failure
- fear of judgement
- fear of the learning environment (noise, busy areas, stigma)
- previous bad experience of learning (school or further education)
- social isolation, withdrawal and / or lack of experience in social settings
- side effects of medication can cause embarrassment and affect self-confidence. These include tremors, excess salivation and uncontrolled body movements.

Concentration

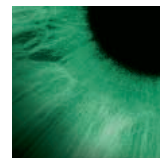
There are also a number of reasons why poor concentration can cause difficulties for this group of learners. These include:

- Lethargy – this can be a symptom of a learner's mental health problem or a side effect of medication which affects their ability to concentrate and causes drowsiness.
- Distractions – individuals may be distracted by either hearing or seeing things that others don't. They may not experience this all of the time and may have medication that reduces these symptoms.

Communication Skills

The ability of a learner to communicate effectively will be directly affected by their confidence and ability to concentrate (see above) and side effects of medication (slurring, excess salivation). Another influencing factor is the level of social contact an individual has. Individuals with mental health problems can be socially isolated and may have few opportunities to be socially involved in their communities. Individuals may also isolate

Supporting learners who have experience of mental health problems



themselves during times when they are unwell, having a temporary effect on their ability to communicate effectively.

Lack of confidence can also affect a learner's ability to communicate what support they require and to ask for help. Being distracted by hearing or seeing things that others don't can affect a learner's ability to communicate fluently.

Memory

An individual's short and long-term memory can in some cases be a barrier to effective learning. Memory can be affected by medication and may make it difficult for a learner to retain new information or remember dates, times and directions.

A learner who has been making good progress may require additional support following a period of illness to refresh their memory of what they had previously known.

Financial

Many individuals with mental health problems will be in receipt of benefits. The startling fact is that an individual in receipt of Incapacity Benefit for more than 2 years has a higher chance of retiring or dying prematurely than they do of moving into employment.²

Engagement with learning is an important step towards moving into employment and breaking this cycle but the fear of coming off benefits with the potential to become unwell again is a huge barrier which individuals require support to overcome.

Stigma

We are used to talking and thinking about physical health in our culture but are less inclined to talk about mental health which leads to myths and confusion arising. As a result of this there can be a great deal of stigma attached to mental health problems that can stop people getting help when they need it, or prevent them talking openly about their problems. Stigma can have an impact on how an individual behaves and cause difficulties applying for further education, applying for jobs and disclosing gaps in employment history. Many individuals fear the reaction of others if they are to disclose that they have a mental health problem and as a result are reluctant to mention this. Whether stigma is perceived or real for an individual it can lead to social isolation and social exclusion and unfortunately the exclusion of individuals with mental health problems extends into learning environments. It is common that individuals with mental health problems have not engaged successfully with learning or have felt unable to express their needs for fear of rejection. The other side of this is that many learning providers may be reluctant to ask about an individual's mental health as they do not have the skills, confidence or resources provide support should it be required.

It is vital that both these barriers are overcome otherwise learners will not have positive and successful experiences of learning. As a result their confidence will be affected further, making it harder for them to engage with learning in the future. Learners with a mental health problem need to feel accepted and part of the learning environment along with other learners.

What else can Learning Centres do to address these barriers?

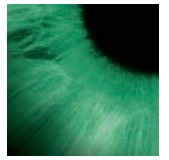
1. Invest in staff

The factor that will make the biggest difference to a learner with a mental health problem successfully engaging with a learning centre is supportive and understanding learning centre staff. Staff who are confident in dealing with the needs of this group of learners and who have the resources and skills to support them are invaluable to providing a positive learning experience and supporting the achievement of positive outcomes.

It is important that staff are friendly, patient and supportive of each individual and their needs, recognising that each learner will require an individual package of support.

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There are a number of courses available which may be appropriate for learning centre staff to develop their knowledge and skills in the area of mental health. These include:

- Mental Health First Aid
- ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention & Support Training)
- Mental Health in the Workplace

2. Provide a Supportive Learning Environment

The environment that a learner experiences can contribute greatly to helping them succeed.

It is important to provide an environment where learners feel confident that they can disclose information about their mental health to get the support they require. This can be done by:

- making it clear that your learning centre is committed to mental health
- confirming that all information disclosed is treated confidentially
- making it clear how this information will be used to support the individual
- identifying a designated member of staff that learners can approach for support

Other practical steps include providing:

- a private and relaxing place where a learner feels comfortable to talk
- as much support and guidance as an individual requires
- written notes of any meetings that take place

3. Provide a flexible learning programme

Many individuals who experience a mental health problem will make a full recovery but for others there will be a fluctuating or cyclical nature to their mental health. For this reason learners may need to take a break from learning for a while. Breaks in learning can affect the individual's confidence and it is vital that the potential need to take time off is recognised and planned for at the start of a learners journey. The knowledge that this possibility has been planned for will make it easier for a learner to express difficulties they are having and to return to the learning environment when they feel better.

4. Provide individual support

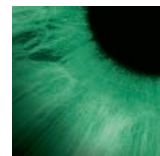
Individuals may require additional support throughout the whole or part of their learning journey. This may be regular support or adhoc support and the frequency and nature of this needs to be agreed with them and reviewed regularly. Some learners with a mental health problem will lead a chaotic lifestyle which will cause difficulties for them engaging successfully with the learning centre. Staff can provide support through a regular and realistic routine to help minimise the disruption this causes.

Where an individual experiences difficulties with self-confidence it is important to emphasise positive progress that has been made and also be realistic about what is achievable. As well as individuals lacking the confidence to see their potential they may also have unrealistic expectations of themselves which should be addressed sensitively.

Many individuals will not require any adjustments to the learning environment but some may need practical adjustments to be made including:

- sensitivity to timetabling to accommodate difficulties with attending early morning classes (side-effects of medication or the need to avoid busy public transport may require this)
- avoiding busy and noisy environments which can cause anxiety or affect concentration
- being flexible with timescales for coursework to accommodate periods of illness

Supporting learners who have experience of mental health problems



- understanding the anxiety that having to do presentations may cause and accommodating this
- being aware of the stress and anxiety that exams can cause
- ensuring that a seat in a particular part of the room is available (eg near door)

Learning Plans play an important part in planning and reviewing an individual's support. They should ensure that learning goals are realistic and steps towards achieving them are manageable and achievable. It is also helpful to provide learners with a copy of any learning plan or meeting notes to overcome any difficulties with memory. It is also helpful to identify key people who can be approached for support and to whom information can be disclosed.

5. Partnership working with external agencies

It is important that staff seek advice if they are unsure of the support an individual requires. This may be from other more experienced staff within their learning centre or external agencies. Many individuals with mental health problems will have mental health workers involved in their care who will be prepared to offer additional support and advice. It is helpful to build up relationships with these workers to ensure there is a clear understanding of the support required by the learner and support available from the learning centre.

6. Be positive

Participation in learning can have a positive effect on an individual's mental health and enable them to achieve great things.

Staff have an important role to play in encouraging learners, listening to what support is required and being realistic about what support they can offer.

Most importantly – BELIEVE!

Additional Resources

www.seemescotland.org.uk
www.samh.org.uk

1. Mental Health Commission, New Zealand
2. Bridging the Gap, Leona McDermid, Social Firms Scotland, 2005

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This paper is part of the Learning Principles series, which aims to provide accessible and practical information for staff in learndirect scotland branded learning centres.

Each document highlights best practice to help people to learn and stay learning.

The series covers a range of themes including sensory impairment, learning difficulties, brain sciences and working with deaf learners.

Learning Principles papers are available in pdf and plain text formats at:

www.lds4partners.com

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