



Helping staff to better promote the mental health of care leavers

Frank Lowe

Consultant Social Worker

Tavistock Clinic, November 2011

Mental Health of Looked after children



- 45% of all children in care are assessed as having a mental health disorder compared with around 10% of the general population (DH, DCSF 2008)
- Phillips (1997) found that 80% of looked after children needed help from mental health services, but only 27% received it.
- National Voice survey (2010) found that 81% of looked after children found life difficult to cope with and 73% said that their emotional health affected their lives, e.g. relationships, education, and work

LAC are particularly at risk of developing mental health problems



- Looked after Children have a 5-fold increased risk of mental disorders, a 6 -7 fold increase of conduct disorders and a 4 – 5 fold increased of attempting suicide in adulthood (DH 2011)

Young people leaving care are a particularly vulnerable group



- Research has consistently found that the health and well-being of care leavers is poorer than that of young people who have never been in care.
- Many aspects of their health have been shown to worsen in the year after leaving care e.g. they are twice as likely to have problems with drugs or alcohol and are more likely to report mental health problems, ‘other health problems’ ,and pregnancy.

The life chances of care leavers are less favourable than their peers



Over-represented amongst young people who are

- unqualified
- not in education, employment or training
- claiming benefits
- homeless
- offending
- teenage parents
- in prison and psychiatric populations.

Why are care leavers vulnerable and are at risk?



- They have suffered adverse childhood experiences such as abuse and neglect
- disproportionately affected by other risk factors e.g. emotional difficulties, low educational attainment, school absence, contact with the police and poverty.
- More vulnerable to risk taking behaviour in adolescence including early and unprotected sexual activity, self-harming, substance misuse

Vulnerability of care leavers – other factors



- Lost or confused personal histories – so difficult to make sense of their experiences
- A deep seated sense of not being loved or ‘held in mind’
- Not feeling a sense of belonging
- An expectation of not being helped
- Insecure/disorganised patterns of attachment which tend to persist – making it difficult to form helpful relationships with foster carers, teachers, s/wks etc
- Having Defences – which makes emotional growth difficult to achieve e.g. self-sufficiency, taking flight, becoming omnipotent .

What helps workers better support care leavers?



- Relevant training
- Understanding how children and young people develop emotionally and psychological
- In particular understanding adolescence as a stage of development
- Developing critical skills
- Good supervision

Providing staff with Relevant Training



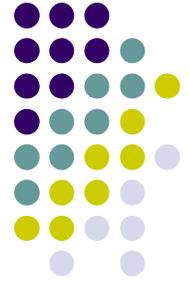
- Tavistock 12 wk Course – ‘Understanding the Emotional Needs of Care Leavers’, covering e.g.:
- *The importance of early experience*
- *Attachment theory*
- *Loss and separation*
- *Adolescence*
- *Dependence and independence*
- *Identity and Difference*
- *Assessing Risk*
- *The emotional impact of the Work*

The importance of understanding early childhood experiences and their impact for example



- Brain development
- Feeling secure or insecure in relationships
- The capacity to trust, seek help and form healthy relationships
- The capacity to regulate one's emotions, create a coherent narrative and to self-reflect

The importance of understanding **Adolescence**- a challenging and risky stage of development for young people and their carers



The young person has to work out:

- Who am I?
- Where do I belong?
- What can I do or be?
- What do I believe in?

This involves

- Separating from parents
- Developing an identity
- Achieving intimacy with others
- Establishing a place in the world

Minimizing risks – , understanding emotional needs, promoting well-being and good mental health



Understanding care leavers need for

- Secure relationships
- Reducing risky behaviours
- help to gain self esteem and skills needed to develop loving and safe relationships.

Developing skills to

- Engage and develop a working relationship
- To understand and contain yp's pain
- Set and maintain boundaries
- Enable

As many YP are not willing to go to counselling, therapy MH services – Workers need to be helped to



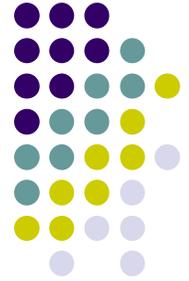
- Get better at assessing emotional needs
- Promote emotional well being
- Develop a therapeutic relationship which provides basic counselling informally as part of their work
- Locate and praise strengths not just focus on problems
- understand the referral pathways and have a relationship with local mental health services

Mike Lindsay (2005) Views of Young people care



- The quality of support for young people leaving care, in most cases was excellent or poor and in some cases non existent
- Not just a plan but they want follow through
- Social Services should provide you with what you need as parents normally would
- A number felt that they had been forced to leave care too early
- Leaving care worker often had no power than they did
- Highest praise is given to those workers who go the extra distance to make good things happen for them
- Unclear about what was their entitlement to aftercare support

Young people views about what promotes their mental health



- Feeling safe- both physically and emotionally
- Being able to talk to an adult of their choice in confidence
- Access to activities that can provide interesting and meaningful activities
- Personal achievement
- Being praised and supported to feel positive about themselves

Quoted in Healthy Care briefing Mental health. NCB (2005)

Key factors in helping Care Leavers



- However hard the young person may resist establishing firm yet reasonable boundaries is often reassuring for them
- The feeling of being understood is essential to hopeful development
- Understanding is based on the worker's continuing ability to question, reflect, consult and to work with the team
- Taking an interest in YP's achievements/strengths
- Recognising that interest and respect from professionals is of major boost to YP'S growth and self-esteem
- The willingness to go on trying and not give up is a crucial part in the YP'S ability to get through things.

Developing a therapeutic relationship



This will involve:

- accepting and respecting the client (warts and all)
- striving to be reliable, attentive, emphatic, sympathetically responsive and encouraging the client to talk about his thoughts and feelings.
- recognising the importance of emotional communications.
- providing psychological space and keeping YP in mind
- make psychological space for the worker to reflect & think

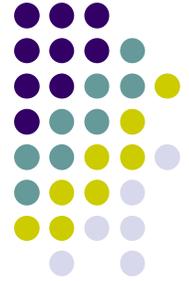
Because:

- Being kept in mind enables the adolescent to develop and bear the emotional impact of his/her thoughts and feelings.
- Developing the client's capacity to make intimate emotional bonds with others, enables effective personal functioning and mental health



What helps?

- Relationship with the yp is of most importance
- How can they learn to trust and depend on me when they have not experienced such a relationship before
- Seeing the young person regularly e.g. once a week
- There is no quick fix/solutions – sometimes just being there may be enough
- Being reliable and consistent through seemingly small things e.g. Ringing when you said you would, being on time for appointments
- To foster secure relationships we need to attune to the yp's emotional needs
- Ask questions about their feelings, childhood, parents, family
- Not to be a perfect but a good enough worker – one who enables the yp to develop a sense of security and trust, knowing that someone holds them in mind.



References

- John Bowlby (1988) A Secure Base: Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory
- Stephen Briggs (2002): Working with Adolescents, A contemporary Psychodynamic Approach
- Mike Stein (2005) Resilience and young people leaving care, Overcoming the odds
- Margot Waddell (2002) Inside Lives: Psychoanalysis and the growth of personality