Building resilient communities

Making every contact count for public mental health

Executive summary

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Executive summary

Mental health should be a key part of every public health strategy. There is a strong moral and economic case for tackling the rising challenge of mental health problems for communities and the people who experience them. There are also clear, evidence-based and cost-effective steps that can be taken to build resilience, promote wellbeing and help to prevent mental health problems.

This report focuses on resilience; setting out the types of services, resources and infrastructure that need to be in place locally to support resilient communities, helping people to 'feel good and function well'. Resilience should be central to any public mental health strategy but is only one element; it is essential that structural inequalities, like income or access to affordable housing, are also tackled. Evidence for this report was gathered through interviews, focus groups and a selected literature review.

What makes resilient people?

Resilience is the capacity of people to confront and cope with life's challenges; to maintain their wellbeing in the face of adversity. From the literature in this area and the personal experiences of our focus groups and interviewees we identified three key factors that affect resilience:

- Activities that promote wellbeing
- Building social capital
- Developing psychological coping strategies.

Promoting wellbeing

Wellbeing is made up of two key elements; 'feeling good' and 'functioning well'[1]. The New Economics Foundation's report, *Five Ways to Wellbeing*, sets out five actions that promote wellbeing[2]. Importantly, these are not just a person's individual responsibility, but can be influenced by 'upstream' interventions; shaping existing services or providing new services in such a way that they encourage behaviours that promote the five ways to wellbeing.

This report sets out the evidence for each of the five ways to wellbeing, as well as examples of upstream interventions that can support people to take part in these activities locally. The five ways to wellbeing are: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning, and give.

Building social capital

Relationships are a key component of social capital and there is strong evidence that they are a major factor in promoting wellbeing and preventing mental health problems. Building social connections is also an area where local authorities, community groups and service providers can make a significant impact. Effective strategies to promote social connections include:

- targeted interventions to build social relationships amongst isolated groups

- changes to the way existing (non-wellbeing focused) services and support are run to facilitate social connections

- interventions that encourage social connections between people with similar experiences to provide peer support.

Developing psychological coping skills

There is a growing evidence base around the use of psychological treatments (including cognitive behavioural therapy) and psychological education for the prevention of mental health problems. This is particularly important for people during periods of stress or change, such as following a diagnosis of a long-term condition, after birth or following a move into a residential home. Simple, cost-effective interventions have been shown to significantly reduce the likelihood of developing depression and reduce stress and anxiety.

What makes resilient communities?

As well as providing the right services, facilities and resources that help to build resilience, local communities must have the capacity and infrastructure to support people to access them.

Mental health awareness

- Every member of front-line staff, every councillor, faith leader, volunteer or manager can play a role supporting the wellbeing of the people that they work with. However, too many have had no mental health training at all and told us that they aren't sure how to make a difference.

- Mental health awareness training can support staff to ensure that every contact with their local community counts in terms of improving wellbeing and signposting people to support.

- This report is accompanied by a training presentation and booklet.

Information

- Without comprehensive, accessible and well-promoted information, people are often unable to access support and professionals struggle to signpost people on to different services. A good information service is essential to making 'every contact count' in promoting wellbeing and resilience.

Local networks

- A closely integrated network of service providers, including voluntary, statutory and private sector organisations, will enable people to be referred easily between services, allow for the sharing of intelligence and best practice and help to prevent duplication of provision.

Accessibility

- Mental health, communication or mobility issues, as well as stigma, discrimination and a lack of confidence can both increase people's need for wellbeing support and present additional barriers to accessing it. It is important to work with local communities when developing services, facilities and resources to ensure that they are open and accessible to everyone.

Making it happen

It takes more than a dedicated Director of Public Health to implement an effective strategy to build resilience, it takes a whole community.

Leadership

- Strong leadership from public health teams and senior staff in local authorities is essential. Councillors can also act as powerful advocates for public mental health in their local area.

Joint working

- Building strong regional and local networks and working jointly with other teams is important to overcoming some of the barriers to commissioning and providing effective public mental health services. Health and Wellbeing boards have an important role to play, opening up new ways of working, enabling more joint funding and encouraging a wellbeing focus across all local authority policies and departments.

Involvement

- Involving local people in the co-production of services not only provides an opportunity for people to take part in the five ways to wellbeing, but will result in better services that are more appropriate for and appealing to the local population, as well as being more effective.

Mental health impact assessment

- Understanding the relationship between factors like social connectedness, physical activity, volunteering and mental health will help to gain a fuller appreciation of the impact that commissioning, or cutting, any service may have locally and who may benefit from accessing it. Wherever possible, wellbeing outcomes should be measured and evaluated robustly.

Conclusion

There is clear evidence and a convincing economic case for investment in public mental health. We know what makes a difference, and we now know what a successful public mental health strategy looks like. Every local area should be supporting its community to take part in activities that promote wellbeing, build social connections and improve psychological coping skills – building community resilience and 'future-proofing' wellbeing. In particular, a targeted approach is needed to support people living in the most difficult life circumstances.

To be successful, public mental health strategies must touch a whole community and involve the whole community in both their development and delivery. If we are going to build community resilience in such challenging times, it is essential that we make every contact count for wellbeing.

For the additional resources accompanying this report, please see www.mind.org.uk/publicmentalhealth

[1] The New Economics Foundation (2008). Five Ways to Wellbeing, The Evidence

[2] ibid