

Supportive Family Training

IMPROVING HEALTH IN LONDON CASE STUDY

Project title: Supportive Family Training

Location: Camden and Barnet

Date: May 2003 onwards

Funding: King's Fund Millennium Award

Context One in four people will experience a mental health problem at some point in their lives. Such problems can affect anyone, regardless of age, wealth, ethnicity or religion, shattering the lives of those affected and the lives of the people close to them. However, support services for people with mental health problems and their carers have long been neglected, partly due to the stigma attached to mental illness.

When Jeffrey Breslaw's son was diagnosed with schizophrenia more than 20 years ago, he found there was little support available for him and his wife. So when he came across Supportive Family Training – a course designed to support the family carers of people with severe mental illness – he decided to train as a facilitator. He then used a Millennium Award to run Supportive Family Training courses in London.

The Millennium Awards scheme Between 2001 and 2004, the King's Fund worked in partnership with the Millennium Commission to offer grant-funding, support and training to 255 people working at community level to improve the health of Londoners. Each person received a maximum £2,000 cash grant from Lottery funding, and took part in a 13-day King's Fund leadership development programme designed to build skills in project management and networking.

This is one in a series of case studies exploring how individuals living in London have used the King's Fund Millennium Awards scheme to make a real difference to the health of others in their communities.



Supportive Family Training

IMPROVING HEALTH IN LONDON CASE STUDY



When Jeffrey Breslaw's son was diagnosed with schizophrenia more than 20 years ago, little support was available for him and his wife. It was several years before he discovered Supportive Family Training – a course run by an organisation in North America, providing support, counselling, education and empowerment for family carers of people with mental illness. Convinced that others would find the course helpful, Jeffrey trained as a facilitator and used Millennium Award funding to run Supportive Family Training courses. Since then, under the auspices of his charity Mencare, he has run several courses for carers in London and has been involved in educating mental health professionals and doctors about the carer's perspective.

Why did you get involved?

My son Nick was diagnosed with schizophrenia more than 20 years ago. My wife, Sheila, and I have cared for him ever since. For much of this time I was involved in raising money for some of the main mental health charities, such as the National Schizophrenia Fellowship (now called Rethink). Then, in 1998, my cousin, who was living in the United States, told me about a North American organisation called the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), which conducts research and offers support, education and advocacy services to those affected by mental health issues. I got in touch with the organisation and they sent me a selection of their videos and pamphlets. One of the pamphlets was particularly helpful. Entitled *What hurts and what helps*, it described the stigma and guilt experienced by the families of people with serious mental illness, the problems they face in dealing with mental health professionals and their need for advocacy. When I read this, I realised that the difficulties I was having with my son's schizophrenia were common to many family carers of people with mental health problems. It took a weight off my mind because I'd thought that I might have been instrumental in causing Nick's illness, perhaps pushing him too hard to achieve.

I became increasingly interested in finding out more about what support was available for carers. Through NAMI I discovered a course called Supportive Family Training (SFT) run by an organisation called Transitional Living Services. This is a free course aimed at the family members of people with severe mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia or major depression. It combines support and counselling with education and empowerment. Eventually I decided to go on a three-day course in Canada to learn how to run SFT sessions myself. I loved the course and decided that I wanted to find a way of running SFT courses in the United Kingdom. I got in touch with Jewish Care (a health and social care charity for the Jewish community) to ask for their advice and they suggested that I apply for a Millennium Award.

What is your project?

The aim of my project was to offer SFT to families caring for people with mental illness. I used the Millennium Award money to pay for the running costs of the course. SFT is designed to be led by two people so Jewish Care introduced me to an occupational therapist called Suzanne Clinton-Davis who agreed to run the sessions with me. Suzanne works with people with severe mental illness and is also involved in training other mental health professionals – together we make a very good team.

The aims of the classes are to help carers realise that other people are in the same situation as them, to educate them about the causes of mental illness and to teach them skills that will help them cope with the situations they're living with. We also encourage them not to struggle alone, but rather to seek help from others – for example, from national mental health charities, support groups, voluntary organisations and mental health trusts.

The course lasts for ten weeks in total, with sessions taking place once a week for two hours. During that time we cover a range of different topics. We start by discussing the main forms of mental illness, such as schizophrenia, depression and bipolar disorder. We look at the science of how the brain is affected by these illnesses as well as examining some of the causes. After that we help people to develop a range of practical skills that will enable them to cope better with

KING'S FUND LIBRARY

11-13 Cavendish Square
London W1G 0AN

Class mark

15H:OC

Extensions

Kin

Date of Receipt

31/1/06

Price

KFPUB

King's Fund



54001001344368

their caring role. These include problem-solving skills, strategies for dealing with crises, communication skills to help them relate more effectively to people suffering from mental illness, and advocacy skills to help them get what they need from mental health services. We present the material in a range of formats, including presentations, structured discussions, role plays and hand-outs.

We ran the first course at Redbridge Jewish Care in East London with eight participants. It was a great success. In the evaluations, participants told us that they found it extremely helpful. While that was taking place, I was introduced to the training co-ordinator at Camden Mental Health Trust. When I described my project, she was really interested. She recognised that the work Suzanne and I were doing could help staff at the trust work more collaboratively with carers in the community to provide better services for those with mental health problems. She asked me to talk to some of the Camden mental health teams to give them an insight into the carer's perspective. I gave a presentation to about eight teams about my own and my wife's experiences of caring for Nick and our dealings with mental health services. I also told them about the work of Mencare in supporting and empowering carers through SFT. Following on from this, Camden Mental Health Trust asked us to run an SFT course for carers in Camden, and Barnet Mental Health Trust asked us to run a series of six courses for carers in Barnet.

Since then, the project has gone from strength to strength. Recognising the importance of the service-user and carer perspective, the Royal College of Psychiatrists has taken a lead in making it mandatory for trainee psychiatrists to receive training from people with mental health problems and their carers. They have asked me to speak about the carer's perspective at a number of conferences, including the Annual Scottish Psychiatrists Conference, which took place in June 2005, and have started using the SFT course in the teaching of junior doctors nationally. As part of this initiative, I've begun teaching classes to junior doctors at Edgware Hospital and St Mary's Hospital.

How did you get people involved?

Initially, we attracted participants to the courses by getting publicity in the local press. When a journalist spotted an article about our project in the Camden New Journal, this led to media coverage in a national newspaper. She requested an interview with me about the project, which appeared in *The Guardian* on 20 November 2002. After the interview was published, I received 47 calls about the project from carers living all over England and overseas. It was a nerve-wracking experience, but it really boosted the profile of the project, which was a great achievement considering that it can be difficult to get people interested in mental illness. More recently, an organisation called Barnet Carers have provided invaluable help with finding new participants for our courses.

What kind of help did you need?

I have received help from several quarters. When I first discovered SFT, it was the people at Transitional Living Services in America who first inspired me to run the course in the United Kingdom. Jewish Care helped me to fill out the forms and put the application together for the award. And throughout the project, my co-presenter, Suzanne Clinton-Davis, has provided a continuous source of support, friendship and intellectual stimulation.

What challenges did you face?

A big challenge for me personally was having to speak in public. When I started leading groups, I was so nervous, but over time I have become much more confident and at ease in front of people. In terms of the participants, the greatest challenge is convincing them to accept that they are caring for someone and that they need to step back and lead lives of their own. It is the hardest thing that these people have to do. Getting media publicity for the project has been a struggle because of the stigma attached to mental illness and the fact that it is a largely unseen condition. So far, I've managed to get coverage in the newspapers and on community television, but I'm really having to fight to get a mention on the radio. The stigma can also make it difficult to attract people onto the courses in the first place because they

M

Millennium Awards



don't accept that they're caring for someone, and they certainly don't accept that the person they're caring for is mentally ill.

What lessons did you learn?

We've made improvements to the course as we've gone along in response to the feedback that we've received in participant evaluations. Often people haven't spoken about their difficulties in public before, so the course material can be very emotive. I've learnt that the best way to support people is to keep group sizes down to about 11-12 people and to be flexible, adapting the content and structure of the sessions to the needs of the group.

Where does your project go from here?

The government is initiating lots of programmes for carers so there is clearly a need for projects such as mine. To increase the reach of SFT, I arranged for the writers of the original course to visit the United Kingdom in 2004 to run a training programme for carers wanting to run SFT courses themselves. In 2006, Mencare is going to host another such training programme. By then SFT will also be available on a CD Rom. This resource will enable us to train many other carers' organisations and mental health trusts to run their own SFT courses.

What advice would you give to others?

If it is to succeed, your project must be financially viable so it's really helpful if either you or a co-worker on the project has some business skills. You will also need to cultivate stamina and motivation to keep going when problems arise as things always take longer than you expect. Don't give up. Keep plugging away. As the old Fred Astaire song says, 'Pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again'.

To find out more about Supportive Family Training and the work of Mencare, visit:
<http://mencare.info>

Interested?

The Millennium Awards scheme has now closed, but the following funding opportunities remain:

King's Fund Funding and Development We offer about £1.5 million a year in funding to London-based community organisations working to improve health and health care (t: 020 7307 2495, e: funding@kingsfund.org.uk, w: www.kingsfund.org.uk/funding).

Unltd This is a national body set up to provide grants, training and support to individuals working to make a positive difference in their communities (t: 020 7566 1100, e: info@unltd.org.uk, w: www.unltd.org.uk).

King's Fund

11-13 CAVENDISH SQUARE
LONDON W1G 0AN

INFORMATION 020 7307 2568

SWITCHBOARD 020 7307 2400

PUBLICATIONS 020 7307 2591

www.kingsfund.org.uk

The King's Fund is an independent charitable foundation working for better health, especially in London. We carry out research, policy analysis and development activities, working on our own, in partnerships and through funding. We are a major resource to people working in health and social care, offering leadership development programmes; seminars and workshops; publications; information and library services; and conference and meeting facilities.

Registered charity 207401