

Some thoughts on User empowerment

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One of the worst consequences of suffering from severe mental distress or illness is that we lose all confidence and feelings of self worth. Our ability to do even the simplest of tasks evaporates. Our minds refuse to function in a familiar way. It can make us feel confused, misunderstood and isolated. We can feel the *stigma* of having a mental illness. It can be difficult for us to explain the pain we suffer and feel (we have no flesh wound or plasters for you to share). We may feel so depressed that all we want to do is stay in bed.

We might not be able to say much, as words can be difficult to find that are universal enough to comprehend. Our whole being may be shut down. Or, there may be voices talking to us that YOU don't hear and we are answering them (talking to ourselves!)

We might have frightening thoughts about things that you find ordinary and so we behave in a way you find strange. Your UNDERSTANDING and SUPPORT at these times can make a huge difference.

Your ATTITUDE to us is very important. Little things can show your respect and trust. In any situation think "how would I like to be treated now?"

Please remember our common HUMANITY. Kindness, compassion and empathy go far. Help us to regain a feeling of being part of our society. So often people with mental illness feel isolated and stigmatised.

Do be ACCEPTING of us. We may feel very distressed and express strong emotions (fear, great sadness, anger, etc.) and it can be very empowering if we feel that you can "hold" our feelings and stay with us. Calm acceptance of us (even if our behaviour may seem odd to you) is really helpful. Try not to be judgemental.

Please leave your own AGENDAS at home, e.g. if you think medication is the wrong approach, please don't say so or you think we ought to get back to work! (be aware that there are good reasons why we are NOT working, mental health itself is more than a full time job). Try not to judge us if you think we are just being lazy, if you do think this then you have missed the point about how hard living is with any mental health disorder, and sufferers do not get paid for their distress – you most likely do for far less distress.

MEDICATION can have strong side effects. They can affect our sleep, patterns, our concentration and our bodily movements (slurred speech, shuffling gait, jerky movements etc.) These are not part of the condition!

Provide us with good INFORMATION. Knowledge is power. Make sure we know as much as we need to about what is going to happen for us. Please be sensitive to the fact that information needs to be given at the right time. When a person is very distressed, they often can't take much on board. Also be aware that some people are not confident with the written word.

People can be helped through **ADVOCACY**. In your work, you will be able to make our voice heard. When we are not functioning well, we would really value your being able to speak up for us. I think that this is an immensely important factor for care workers to be able to do. Because you are working closely with us, you will be the people in whom we might confide. You would be able to pass on our concerns (with our consent of course).

CONFIDENTIALITY. Because we have mental health difficulties, it does not mean that you are entitled to share details of our lives with everyone.

Please be aware of **BOUNDARIES**. Our problems may be complex so please do not think that you can make everything better. You have **NOT** got a magic wand!

Try not to **PATHOLOGISE** us. Do not see every expression of emotion as part of our illness, it might be entirely appropriate.

Above all, please **LISTEN** to us and **TALK** to us. Brush up on your active listening skills. It is the universal thing we ask of people who are working with us. We want to **COMMUNICATE** with you!

LASTLY, FOCUS ON OUR STRENGTHS

Best wishes in your work.

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