

## Finding the best way to help young people rebuild their social networks

How can support workers best help young people recovering from psychosis rebuild their social networks?

Connecting People is a research study that seeks to answer that question – and recommend methods that support workers can use in their everyday work with people who have experienced psychosis. The research team wants to find out how support workers can effectively help people to widen their social circles and thus gain access to support from friends as well as connections to a community that can aid a recovery journey.

The project focuses on ‘social capital’ – a concept that refers to the assistance and opportunities offered by a network of friends and acquaintances. ‘Research indicates, for instance, that people with access to greater social capital can more easily find work or get a promotion,’ says Dr Martin Webber, who is based at the Institute of Psychiatry, King’s College London, and is leading the research. ‘Similarly, membership of a social network can bring access to other network members’ resources, such as expert information and financial support, as well as promoting mental well-being.’

People with mental health problems, particularly those with experience of psychosis, however, have less access to social capital than others. ‘Typically, people who have experienced psychosis are marginalised by society, have fewer friends, less contact with family members, and find it difficult to sustain a job or stable housing. As a result, their opportunities to establish new social connections are limited,’ says Martin.

Training to give support workers the skills they need to help increase people’s social capital will be developed after researchers have spent time with support workers who are already working with younger people (aged under 35) with psychosis.

A researcher will watch, talk to and learn from support workers employed by NHS-run community-based mental health services (including early intervention services and services supporting recovery); by a voluntary sector agency that provides housing support to people with psychosis; and by small neighbourhood-based social inclusion projects. The researcher will also talk to people with experience of psychosis who use these services – based in London, Kent, Birmingham and Manchester – and to their relatives, to find out what they think are the most successful ways in which support workers can help people join or create social networks.

‘Support workers can help people make new friends and acquaintances which may improve their access to social capital, but little is known about how effective they are in this aspect of their work,’ says Martin. ‘We want to find out how support workers help people to make use of the power, prestige, wealth or abilities of others to help them progress in their lives.’

The resulting recommended way of working will be honed with the help of mental health professionals, people with experience of psychosis, family members and international experts on social care and social capital. Its success will be tested in future research projects.

At the end of the project, the team will also develop self-help materials for people who have experienced psychosis and their family members.

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