



Introduction to Working with Customers with a Mental health Condition

Topic 02 – What is a Mental Health Condition?

May 2014

Time

Approximately 1 hour.

Objectives

At the end of this topic learners will be able to:

- explain how mental health conditions may affect customer contact
- explain the difference between a mental health condition and distress
- state the appropriate mental health terminology to be used
- describe some people's attitudes towards people with a mental health condition; and
- explain how these attitudes can lead to discrimination.

Method of Delivery

This topic is facilitator led. It also uses discussion.

Learning Points

This event will cover the following learning points:

- Mental Health terminology.
- Definition of a mental health condition.

Support Material

- Handout 02.01 – Useful Websites.
- Exercise 02.01 – Mental Health Conditions Quiz.
- Exercise 02.02 – Types of Behaviour.
- FRN 02.01 – Types of Behaviour – Suggested Responses.
- FRN 02.02 – Stress Vulnerability Model.
- Visual Aid 02.01 – MIND Definition of Mental Health.
- Visual Aid 02.02 – The Effects of Stereotyping.

Validation

The topic will be validated through question and answer and discussion.

Introduction

Let's start with a quiz to determine what your perceptions are about people with mental health conditions.



Issue Exercise 02.01 – Mental Health Conditions Quiz.

Allow learners approx 5 minutes to complete individually.



This quiz sheet is to be completed individually. Ask the learners to hold onto their responses for later discussion.

Do not issue the answer sheet yet; this is used later in the day.

Customer Contact and Mental Health Conditions



The next exercise is around getting the learners to think how general health conditions may affect customer contact.

Stress that we are not talking about mental health conditions in this exercise.



Divide the learners into pairs or small groups, ask them to discuss the following based on their experience.

Allow 5-10 minutes. Bring groups back together and discuss.



What concerns do you have when working with a customer who has a health condition?



Suggested answers should include:

- Not knowing how to help the customer.
- Not knowing where to signpost the customer.
- Not knowing what **provision** is available for this customer.
- Afraid I'll make the customer's situation worse by saying the wrong thing.
- Not knowing much about their condition and having to ask questions which might embarrass them or me.

This list is not exhaustive.



The aim of this exercise is to start the learners thinking about any concerns they may have about dealing with customers with any health condition, the next exercise will narrow this down and deal with working specifically with customers with a mental health condition.



Show the following question on pre prepared flip chart:

What, if any, worries or concerns do you have about working with customers with a mental health condition?

Ask each learner to write on a post-it one thing they are concerned about when considering working with customers with a mental health condition. Encourage the learners to be honest and frank!

Display a blank flip sheet for the learners to stick their post-it onto.

When that's done ask the learners to have a look at the other post-its. If they see one that they agree with – if it's something that's also in their mind but not the major factor – they should put a tick on that post it.



Common responses to this activity are:

- How can I help the customer?
- How can I signpost the customer?
- What **provision** is available for this customer?
- I am frightened I'll make the customer's situation worse by saying the wrong thing.
- I am frightened they may become upset or act strange and I won't know what to do.
- I am worried about causing them to hurt or kill themselves.
- I am frightened they will attack me.

Capture main response themes on flip chart for later discussion and use as final review of event.

This list is not exhaustive.

We did this exercise to start you thinking about your perceptions of mental health conditions and any issues you may have around working with customers with health conditions, particularly mental health conditions.

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Many of the concerns you have raised relate to any health condition, not just mental health conditions. We will be addressing the concerns you have raised throughout the day.

What is a Mental Health Condition?

Mental health conditions are a complex area and defining them is difficult.

Some people can have what would be defined as a mental health condition and recover without ever being aware that they had such a condition in the first place.

In other cases the condition may get worse without relevant support and treatment.

A mental health condition affects how we think, feel and behave. It is more common than you might think.

According to statistics [\(MIND\)](#) one in four people has or will have some form of mental health condition at some time in their life. It can affect daily life, relationships and/or health. Some conditions can, from time to time, have serious effects.

Mental health conditions can not only affect the individual but also those around them such as family, friends and colleagues.

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There are many different kinds of mental health conditions and, in spite of their having the same name; the effects will be different for each individual experiencing it.

A mental health condition is not caused by one thing in particular. It can occur for all sorts of reasons such as stress, anxiety or from having had a traumatic experience.

Everybody has stress and anxiety in their lives to a greater or lesser extent and people deal with it differently. It is also important to consider the differing extents of the impact on every day life.



You may find this easier to explain using FRN 02.02 and reproducing the diagram on flip as an illustration.

Many people feel that mental health conditions are easy to spot but in practice it can be difficult. Even for health professionals it can be difficult to decide if a mental health condition is present or not.



Issue Exercise 02.02 – Types of Behaviour.

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Learners should work through the following individually or in pairs.

Allow about 15 minutes for the learners to work through the lists and complete them.

Take time to work through the table, noting down possible explanations for the behaviour shown.



The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate that just because a person's behaviour appears to be unusual; it is not necessarily a sign that they have a mental health condition.

Stress that these are not clear cut issues, circumstances and context are very important.

At the end of the exercise bring the group back together to discuss their responses.



Refer to FRN 02.01 for suggested responses.

Allow time for the learners to share and discuss their responses.

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That exercise demonstrates how difficult it is to define what is a mental health condition and what is ‘normal’.

So to return to our question ‘What is a mental health condition?’, unfortunately there is no single definition that can be used.

The 2007 Mental Health Act is the main piece of legislation governing how people may be assessed and treated for severe mental health conditions in circumstances where their illness allows for such decisions to be taken by mental health professionals.

Even in the Act, however, there is no specific definition. The Act uses the single generic term ‘mental disorder’ which covers ‘any disorder of mind or brain’.

The mental health charity MIND has produced the following definition:



Show Visual Aid 02.01.

You may prefer to have the definition prepared on flip.

“Mental health is a level of emotional well-being that allows an individual to function in society or an absence of significant mental health problems”.

The exercise we have just done shows that behaviours which seem ‘unusual’ may be caused by everyday circumstances and are not necessarily attributable to a mental health condition.

It is also important to stress that most of the customers with a mental health condition who use **Jobcentre Plus** services have mild conditions for which they are receiving treatment.

Appropriate Mental Health Terminology

As we have discussed, the terms “mental health problem”, “mental health condition”, “mental illness” and “mental ill health” are frequently used. There seems to be no consensus over which term is preferred by those who experience mental health problems – all are acceptable terms for some people.

As with all types of disability, the correct terminology can change and not all mental health groups or individuals with a mental health condition agree on the appropriate terminology.

It is a good idea to check relevant websites from time to time to keep up to date with all aspects of current thinking on mental health issues such as changes in terminology.



Do you know of any websites that could help?



- MIND
- DWP Diversity website
- Mental Health Foundation
- Time to change
- Rethink
- Seemescotland
- NHS Choices – Mental Health
- [Mental Health First Aid England](#)

This list is not exhaustive.



Issue Handout 02.01 – Useful Websites.

You may prefer to send this to learners after the event as it contains links.

There is room on the Handout for learners to add to this list.

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Many people who have, or have had, a mental health condition avoid talking about it for various reasons. One of those reasons is the stigma that can be attached to those who have a mental health condition.

The use of derogatory words such as ‘nutter’ or ‘psycho’ in the press and on television, are examples of this. Media has changed enormously over recent years so perhaps this can be amended.



If you had such a condition how might these terms make you feel?



- Unhappy.
- Insulted.
- Victimised.
- Misunderstood.
- Unfairly treated.

This list is not exhaustive.

These terms are a form of discrimination and exclude the individual. They can destroy a person's confidence and leave them feeling isolated and misunderstood.

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Stigma and discrimination are often the biggest challenges faced by people who have a mental health condition.

It is inappropriate and discriminatory to use these words and terms to describe someone who has a mental health condition. To remain professional and non-discriminatory, you must use neutral, respectful language.



Ask the learners to list acceptable terms. In response they should refer to the flip that is already on display.

Bear in mind, however that some people with a mental health condition may call themselves by one of the negative words or phrases we have discussed. That is their choice. You must not use the same language, however. **You must not reinforce this negative language by using it yourself.**

You should also avoid using phrases which might imply that people are a victim of the condition, such as “suffers from”, “is afflicted by” and so on. Avoid describing the person by their mental illness, for example “he is a depressive”. It is better to say “He has depression”.

As always, you must treat each customer as an individual and respect their needs.

Avoid stereotyping our customers. Those with mental health conditions can have the same responsibilities in life as those who have not, such as looking after children, running a household and looking for work.

We have to be careful what we say – it affects how we think and that affects how we behave.



Show Visual Aid 02.02 – The Effects of Stereotyping.

There is a self-perpetuating cycle at work here:

- Ignorance and misconceptions lead to...
- Negative social attitudes and language lead to...
- People with mental health conditions being treated differently (e.g. laughed at, feared, avoided, detained) leads to...
- Some people with mental health problems behaving differently and experiencing social exclusion (e.g. unemployment) leads to...
- More negative social attitudes and language.

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Remember that if even a few people behave in an extreme way, this can stigmatise the majority. Always treat each customer as an individual.



Ask if there are any questions about language and discuss before continuing.

Summary

In this topic we have:

- discussed concerns when working with customers who have a health condition or mental health condition
- explored the difficulty of defining mental health conditions
- discussed how the use of inappropriate terminology may affect a person with a mental health condition; and
- explained the appropriate terminology to use.



Ask the learners if they have any questions before moving on to the next topic.

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End of Topic