Rural mental health: a collaborative approach to improving client’s health-related behaviours

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This project is fostering and developing a collaborative approach between mental health workers and lifestyle advisors for consumers living with mental health issues. ‘Mental illnesses affect people’s ability to participate in health-promoting behaviours. In turn, problems with physical health, such as chronic diseases, can have a serious impact on mental health and decrease a person’s ability to participate in treatment and recovery’. Country Health SA Local Health Network (CHSALHN) offer a free program ‘Do it for Life’ (DIFL), which addresses health-related behaviour change with a client-centred approach, including smoking, poor nutrition, risky alcohol consumption, physical inactivity and stress. The program aims to support high-risk individuals to better understand the health impact of their risk behaviours, identify goals and strategies to enable lifestyle changes to prevent or delay the onset of chronic disease and enhance their quality of life.

DIFL has been designed to foster a collaborative approach between consumers, GPs and other health professionals, to promote awareness and understanding of the benefits of accessing other services and help breakdown the barriers to engagement. In early 2012 a pilot project was implemented to ensure CHSALHN Mental Health consumers were given an opportunity to incorporate healthy lifestyle changes into their mental health and wellbeing plan towards recovery. Since then the CHSALHN Mental Health Services noticed that consumers who had been referred to the DIFL benefited from the program.

A pilot project was implemented with Mental Health Services in Murray Bridge and Port Pirie. The team consisted of DIFL workers, mental health teams, health promotion and non-government organisations, such as Life without Barriers and Red Cross, with the aim to improve the health behaviours of consumers with mental health challenges. Regular meetings with key partners were held. Opportunities to improve referral pathways, communication and services were identified to ensure positive outcomes for consumers.

Insights identified within the pilot program included:

- time is required to engage with consumers due to illness and forgotten appointments
- working with NGOs can assist in engaging with consumers
- all workers involved need to have an understanding of healthy lifestyle behaviours to encourage the uptake by the consumer
- issues with weight gain due to medication—emphasis is needed on long-term health outcomes with a shift away from short-term unsustainable weight loss.
Outcomes of the project have included:

- integrated into staffs’ everyday work is the referral process for DIFL
- improved partnerships and strengthened communication with NGOs
- involvement with personal support workers strengthened
- involvement in the clients’ care through joint visits was established (when appropriate)
- linkages with Country Mental Health Promotion team established and strengthened
- some mental health staff trained in the Flinders Tool for chronic disease risk factors
- mental health workers’ knowledge has increased about local facilities, healthier options, walking tracks and programs
- some mental health staff opted to be part of healthy lifestyle programs to improve their own health.