An empowerment approach to group work with people experiencing anxiety

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One in seven Australians are affected by an anxiety disorder. After the closure of a local specialist anxiety service, we developed a group intervention and ran it six times. The group provided information and management strategies empowering participants to identify their own anxiety experience and develop self-management skills.

The group was advertised publicly so people could enter from the community rather than via a clinical pathway, avoiding labelling by an expert to access resources. The pre-group interview was by telephone and focused on their ability to attend the group and participate, not on diagnosing the type or severity of disorder. In the first session participants described their own experience of anxiety and the impact it was having on their lives and relationships. This narrative-style self-assessment was validating rather than pathologising.

A range of evidence-based anxiety management material was offered, including neurological information, relaxation, mindfulness, cognitive, behavioural and psycho-education. Participants chose their own combination of therapies, thus ‘diagnosis’ and ‘treatment’ were self-driven.

Evaluation indicates a positive participant journey, with marked decreases in anxiety at the end of the group.

Take home messages:

• effective interventions can be developed locally within teams

• using people’s inherent strengths is an alternative to the expert/patient model.