

About

The purpose of our Occasional Papers is to promote (and provoke) new thinking around how we plan and deliver short break services to produce better outcomes for all concerned. Papers will focus on particular issues affecting people who use these services and their carers, but also the challenges facing service providers and those making strategic decisions. The papers can be downloaded from the Shared Care Scotland website and used freely for training and awareness raising purposes. For further information please contact Don Williamson at Shared Care Scotland.

A Break in Communication

Introduction

Our first paper has been written by Isobel Allan MBE. The paper looks at the importance of communication in building positive relationships between people who use short break *services* and their carers, and the people providing the service.

Isobel has been a carer for over 29 years. She cares for her daughter Susie who has profound learning disabilities, complex and multiple health needs and challenging behaviour. Isobel is a trainer in bereavement, counselling and interpersonal skills.

The Importance of Trust

It has been well documented that the most vital requirement for the vast majority of carers is a 'Break from Caring' which is also known as respite. A break from caring can tick many boxes including quality respite for the cared for person, an opportunity for the carer to recharge their batteries, afford time with other family members, permit work, social, educational or leisure occasions, or a window of opportunity to simply relax and enjoy a more natural lifestyle free from the stresses and demands that embrace caring for a dependant relative or friend. Yet using 'respite' is not a natural or desired act. Carers use respite – not because they want to - but because they need to. Who among us would wish to send the vulnerable person we love to an unfamiliar place or setting to be cared for by a vast array of people unknown to the cared for person or the carer. This becomes further complicated when the cared for person has limited or no ability to communicate with others. When lines of direct communication and feedback are severed due to illness or disability, the carer has to rely on verbal or written feedback from other people following any respite stay. Trust is a major yet fragile component when carers entrust the health and wellbeing of the person they love to another. The experience of a respite break will be severely influenced by degrees of trust which can enrich or damage future respite opportunities.

OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES: A BREAK IN COMMUNICATION

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Trust has to be earned and is dependant on the building blocks of good communication, meaningful engagement and accurate feedback.

Good Communication

Meaningful communication is an essential and vital component of any type of break from caring and is especially important when the cared for person cannot offer any verbal feedback about their experience whilst living in a different environment, being cared for by unfamiliar people. Care workers and staff are often giving training in a host of activities including moving and handling, first aid, medication, food hygiene etc. Interpersonal skills training is seldom given priority in training, giving the impression, good communication comes naturally or already exists in people. This is a myth. Good communication is a skill which requires explicit training and should be viewed as critical to the success or failure of any break from caring for everyone involved. In the absence of good communication and accurate feedback following a respite visit the only potential reference for the carer lies with the cared for persons behaviour or overall physical condition when they return from a respite stay. Trust may be instantly destroyed and difficult to re-establish when feedback is poor or non-existent, especially if the cared for persons overall condition {emotional or physical} seems or is proven to be altered in some way. Vulnerable people in the care of others may suffer injury, some may be unavoidable during a respite stay. Problems arise, perhaps not so much from the injury itself, but when any injury cannot be explained.

Information without explanation, in this context, equates to major issues around meaningful communication and infers poor care and attention offered to the cared for person. Top of any carers priority list is the safety of the person they love, especially if that person is totally vulnerable. Any injury, especially those unexplained, robs the carer of any positive experience from a break from caring and compromises trust in the future. When incidents cannot be identified or explained in the present – they cannot be remedied in the future. If the pathway of obtaining feedback from the cared for person does not exist, the power lies with others in supplying information, explanation and interpretation. Without investment and training in good human relationship and interpersonal skills, there is a danger that feedback from others, when it occurs, will be sparse, selective, inaccurate or sometimes fabricated to protect themselves or deflect responsibility.

Meaningful Engagement

Good communication skills permit meaningful engagement which develops and enriches partnerships. All relationships (personal or professional) will succeed or fail on the basis of the quality of the relationship. Carers require honest, open and transparent pathways of communication that will accurately reflect the cared for persons respite stay. Care workers, especially those involved in offering out of home respite have an especially demanding and challenging role. Their involvement with the cared for person is not continuous, therefore any changes in the physical, mental, emotional, social and physical needs of the person in their care must be accurate, current and communicated. This can only be obtained from those who offer continuous care (usually

a family member) who have a responsibility to supply all such information. This information resources the care staff and ensures the overall safety, health and wellbeing of the cared for person during any out of home respite stay.

Breaks from Caring: a Quality Service

The Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001 and the subsequent Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care and various Care Standards have all improved the quality of services in Scotland which includes Breaks from Caring. These are all systems, structures and tools to legislate, monitor and provide frameworks and principles on services offered to others. In the provision of 'what to do in a service' we must never compromise the importance of 'how we offer a service'.

Breaks from Caring should be a positive and meaningful experience for the carer and the cared for person. Priority needs to be given to develop methods of capturing this experience to enhance the quality of service offered in the future and ensure a Break from Caring does not become a 'Break' in Caring.

If in doubt – check it out!

Isobel Allan/August 2009

About Shared Care Scotland

Shared Care Scotland is a national charity which exists to support the development and improvement of short break services for carers and the people they care. Our services include:

- An online and telephone enquiry service to help put carers and service users in touch with short break services that best match their needs
- General information and advice on all matters relating to short break services
- Events, networks, publications and learning resources to share knowledge, experience and successful practice.

Please contact us if you require further information or advice.

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