

Finding ways to fire vital social networks for people recovering from mental illness

Our study indicates that identifying and encouraging the enthusiasms of those who have suffered psychosis builds new relationships that then lead to them gaining jobs, homes and improved health.

BlueSCI – a social and cultural inclusion project in Trafford, Manchester – excels with its ‘can-do’ attitude. It’s not a traditional day centre where people pick from a given set of options. It is based on people saying what they want to achieve. So, when one young man wanted to mend bicycles, they found him a lorry container as a bicycle maintenance workshop. Gradually the BlueSCI project has supported people to build their own ideas and passions into business plans that can lead them into developing a social enterprise.

That young man is recovering from mental health problems. We know such issues can leave people isolated and cut off from support, making them yet more vulnerable. Emotional support, a job and friends can all aid recovery – precisely what this person gains through mending bicycles within the project. BlueSCI has cracked how to help him get better through building up his social contacts. The trick has been finding and backing what fires him up – in this case, bicycles. The centre is also good at integrating with the community – hiring out space to local groups – so that it is not just for people with mental health problems.

This is just one example from our research into building ‘social capital’ for people



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User of the Start Again football project

with psychosis. Many of us take for granted our 'social capital' - our ability to access the power, prestige, wealth and abilities of others to help us get ahead. It can mean having someone to help with the DIY at home, able to lend us money, discuss intimate matters and let us offload at the end of the day. Social capital is a personal wealth for health. But some people don't have much. Particularly those who are marginalised with mental health problems – they need it most but often find it hardest to generate. Typically, they have fewer friends, less contact with family and difficulties sustaining a job or stable housing.

Investing in 'social capital'

That's why the NIHR School for Social Care Research has funded the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London to understand best practice. We are researching how health and social care workers help young people recovering from psychosis to make these all important relationships and to invest in their 'social capital'.

Start Again – a social enterprise football project mainly for young men in Birmingham – is an example. Robert (not his real name), in his early 20s, has suffered from psychosis, hearing voices, having hallucinations. He was living in supported housing – withdrawn, no job, no girlfriend. But he liked football. Now he is a member of the team, playing a sport that demands eye contact, communication on the pitch, banter afterwards.

'Getting out is nice,' he says. 'Particularly when I was a bit lower and less confident. It just helps to get out and get my head up. Just to meet people.' Robert met his best friend through the project. He recently helped Robert move into his own flat and now he feels able to apply for jobs. Robert is getting pay back for successfully investing in his social capital.

Better than drug therapies?

We have identified key ingredients from such success stories and have written a practice guide*. Now, we are testing it out with practitioners and academics as well as holding focus groups with service users. Next step is to train agencies to use the practice guidance and test whether outcomes improve over a year for three different groups – working age and also older adults with mental health problems (excluding dementia sufferers) plus adults with learning difficulties.

We're doing an economic evaluation to test the cost-effectiveness of this approach to building social capital. In future, we also aim to undertake a randomised controlled trial to evaluate the effectiveness of the Connecting People practice guidance, so this work can gain the same evidential quality as drug prescription or psychological therapy in mental health services. Maybe, investing in social capital will prove more profitable than spending millions on psychopharmacological or psychological therapies.

Project: [Developing a social capital intervention for people with psychosis](#)

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Web: * [The Practice Guide is available for download at www.connectingpeoplestudy.net](http://www.connectingpeoplestudy.net)

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