

The experience of young people seeking emotional support in regional NSW

Abstract

Objective:

The objective of this study is to examine and describe the experiences of young people, aged 16-24 years, who have used the Safe Haven mental health service in Parkes, regional NSW.

Methods:

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design involving individual interviews with four participants recruited via purposeful sampling. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcribing service. Data were coded manually and themes verified by two experienced research supervisors (KD and RM).

Findings:

Six themes were identified: Needing help to seek help; Acceptance; Time and space; Feeling safe; New understandings; and Sharing. Participants described moving from their experience of distress, to feeling accepted, growing and learning, with the ability to better help themselves and the desire to help other young people, based on their own individual experiences.

Implications for practice:

This study has demonstrated the acceptability for young people of a drop-in café-style Safe Haven mental health (MH) support service staffed

by skilled and experienced peer workers. An 'all-ages' service enabled youth to access help when they may not have sought more formal MH support services. Improvements to the model could be achieved by extended opening hours and providing a greater visible presence in the local schools. Increased community awareness of the service would ensure more adults were able to facilitate young people's initial access to the service.

Conclusion:

All participants in this study identified the positive experience of support for their mental distress provided by the Safe Haven model in Parkes. The skilled peer workforce, and the 'drop-in' model of care allowed them to have control over when and how they accessed support which was of primary importance. However, reaching appropriate help initially required the active engagement of a supportive and motivated adult, someone who knew about the SH model and was able to physically accompany them on that first visit. Once introduced to the setting, the Parkes Safe Haven (PSH) model, with its philosophy of unconditional positive regard and recovery focus enabled young people to feel empowered concerning their own mental health, and gave them the opportunity to develop emotionally and gain increasing knowledge about their own strengths and abilities to manage their own healthcare.



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A career in nursing, culminating in the past 15 years spent in the public mental health sector, and experience in the child and adolescent mental health service, has confirmed the understanding that early and community level health interventions can have life-long benefits for individuals and communities.