

Giving psychological first aid to NHS colleagues

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Dr Tracey Ryan-Morgan, Lynda Mizen and Sharron Price explain the urgency of planning immediate responses and services deployed for staff wellbeing through the covid crisis

Why we did what we did



Dr Tracey Ryan-Morgan

Neath Port Talbot Hospital is part of the Swansea Bay University Health Board (NHS Wales). The main hospital site is funded for 104 sub-acute medical beds, 19 elective surgery beds and 12 specialist rehabilitation in-patient beds. There is a wide range of local and regional services provided on-site with 1,236 members of staff employed.

In early March 2020, the health board planning and preparation for dealing with SARS-CoV2 (covid-19) was picking up pace when we were unfortunate to experience an early outbreak amongst staff members.

Senior clinical management were aware that the emotional impact of exposure to this virus was significant. Staff members were experiencing high levels of anxiety and distress, and this impacted on all areas.



The intensity and responsiveness of the support needed was outside of the skill set and training of many. Fortunately, there was on-site access to two clinicians with the requisite skills.

**Lynda Mizen**

With a reduction in elective activity they were able to step out of their substantive roles into the proposed staff support function immediately: “Here for You” is staffed by a consultant clinical neuropsychologist and a nurse counsellor.

The proposed “Here for You” service had the backing of the operational site manager and senior HR on-site, and was supported by the unit nurse director, unit service director and unit medical director with immediate effect.

**Sharron Price**

Two furnished and dedicated time-out rooms were prepared (stocked with drinks, snacks, flowers, relaxing music), and an on-call phone for the two staff providing the support. “Here for You” leaflets were distributed throughout the hospital and shared at Bronze Command briefing. The service was operational within a few days of the initial idea.

Plan – what we did

Provision was an immediate response to need as it arose which enabled the service to be both adaptable and flexible. It was started with 16 weekly sessions being dedicated to psychological first-aid for staff at all levels of the organisation.

“Here for You” staff met with all grades and disciplines of colleagues in their wards and departments, taking all safety precautions. Colleagues from physiotherapy, nursing, theatres, occupational therapy, housekeeping, medicine, catering, management, administration, radiology and portering were all supported over the period.

Your approach of just arriving in the department initially is an enormous support as it helps staff to offload mental stress, worries and anxieties during this difficult and unusual time.

The approach was “bottom-up” in that the service was taken to staff. The “Here for You” staff were visible throughout the hospital, covering day and night shifts, bank holidays and weekends. Staff who were struggling could also ring on-call and ask for help in the moment.

Service provision included:

- a. Active listening;
- b. Normalising emotional responses;

- c. Encouraging staff to develop their own self-care;
- d. Empowering colleagues to problem-solve to manage the uncertainty; and,
- e. Signposting to other support

This service has been invaluable during this unsettling time. The staff have been available at any opportunity both formally/informally, and approachable.

A key strength of the “Here for You” service was being able to close the loop on key themes and issues as they arose by taking (anonymised) themes to the senior matron/head of operational services and then feeding back to the staff who had raised the concerns. This facilitated clear and responsive communication between management and clinical and frontline staff.

Colleagues felt that being listened to and supported at the point of “melt-down” was often all they needed in order to continue to work effectively. A few staff were supported by the senior matron and her team to go on sick leave in order to self-care more effectively. Staff who went home unwell were followed up by telephone call support and then met by “Here for You” staff at the point of return to work.

The service you have provided was invaluable to staff and added to them feeling safe in their working environment. It was important as a manager to know you were around should a member of staff need support.

Outcomes – what we learned

Common themes which emerged included:

- a. PPE – anxieties about personal safety and risk.
- b. Some staff reported feeling exhausted and more emotional.
- c. Staff sickness, with covid-19. There were a number of staff admitted to hospital with covid-19 symptoms during this period and this was a huge source of stress to their colleagues.
- d. Deployment

Deployment led to staff expressing uncertainty about being sufficiently skilled for their new role or environment.

I have to extend our sincere gratitude to you for going above and beyond with your support and words of reassurance. It's been a very difficult time for us and having you "pop" in to check in and meet us on the shop floor has been hugely appreciated and makes us feel valued and cared for. Your professionalism knows no bounds and the staff are truly grateful.

e. A number of staff reported feeling guilty either at refusing or not being able to work on the frontline (red zones). Many felt that they were risking the health of their own families due to exposure to covid.

f. Staff struggled with the repeated exposure to death (multiple losses) and with having to manage the end of life care with no family present.

Lessons and leadership

In the present circumstances, acting fast to meet a clear staff need by providing "bottom-up", on the spot, support is the most effective way to respond. Staff who feel valued and supported, as a result, are in a better position to remain in the workplace. Regular communication, in a 360° arc means that key issues are acted on quickly.

The presence of the "Here for You" team has been a constant comfort and reassurance through the most difficult time I can recall in my career. There has been an experienced and compassionate professional to reach out to and talk everything through.