

Getting Inside the Mind of People with Mental Health Problems

Ambulance staff in the East of England are being given a unique insight into mental health problems as part of improvements to their training.

During a session dedicated to mental health, trainee ambulance staff are given headphones to wear so they can understand what it is like to hear voices and, effectively, get inside the mind of someone with mental health problems. The trainer, Janey Antoniou has first hand experience of schizophrenia, depression, psychiatric hospitals and the Mental Health Act 1983. This enables her to explain to non-sufferers what it feels like to have these conditions and what she has found helpful in the past. As well as learning the facts about mental health problems, trainees can gain a personal insight into the issues that sufferers face and can ask questions from someone who has first hand experience of mental health problems and who is well enough to explain exactly what happens. The half-day training session also covers symptoms and treatments and gives ambulance staff the opportunity to examine their own mental health in the face of the demands of their job.

One paramedic student, Sarah Whiterod, commented: *“Janey’s session made her condition real for us and gave us a much better understanding of what she copes with on a daily basis. Janey was very open and honest and the session was very interesting to be part of.”*

Her colleague, Penny Prestedge, agreed, adding: *“I found Janey’s session on Mental Health very informative, giving me a beneficial insight into how people suffer and cope with their illness on a daily basis.”*

The East of England Ambulance Trust (formerly the Bedfordshire & Hertfordshire Ambulance Service) introduced the new training to improve the skills of ambulance personnel in dealing with people suffering from mental health problems. Phil Alexander commented:

“While many ambulance personnel may have experienced what an acute physical problem feels like and can empathise with the patient, only one person in four will have some kind of mental health problem during their lifetime.

“It is increasingly likely that ambulance staff will encounter people with mental health problems and it is important that they know how to respond appropriately, particularly as it may not always be obvious what kind of mental health problem a person is suffering from. For example, people

with severe mental illnesses such as psychosis may also have medical problems such as diabetes, cardiac and cholesterol problems which may necessitate emergency admission to hospital. The new training gives ambulance staff a better understanding of mental health problems and makes them more confident in dealing with people with such problems. For end users, this will result in a more positive and less stressful experience when they come into contact with ambulance staff.”

Up to 50% of people in urban areas who have severe mental health problems will also have a recurrent drug or alcohol problem. Ambulance personnel may be required to take someone to hospital under a section of the Mental Health Act (1983), or from October 2008, they may be returning someone to hospital who is on Supervised Community Treatment. In each of these circumstances, the service user may be in distress and may find it difficult to express what they find helpful or unhelpful. An understanding of mental health problems will be invaluable in helping ambulance personnel to communicate more effectively.