Older people's mental health and wellbeing

What older people are saying

Summary

outside
the box

Older people's mental health and wellbeing
What older people are saying

What we did and who we heard from

Outside the Box is working with a wide range of older people and organisations to find ways for older people to get good support for their mental health and wellbeing. This report brings together what we have been hearing through several projects.

- Creating conversations between older people, staff who work in care and support services and people from community groups.

- Working with older people and community groups in Scottish Borders on what helps people have good mental wellbeing.

- Hearing the experiences of people living in care homes.

- Talking to people in East Renfrewshire about the potential for ordinary community activities providing places that can support people's mental wellbeing.

Over 700 people from all over Scotland were part of these conversations.

This is a summary of a longer report which has more detail on the points here. You can read this on the Outside the Box website: www.otbds.org

"The conversations about mental wellbeing have shown this group is a place where it is ok to talk about this."

"I would be cautions about having this conversation at some of the other groups I go to. They focus on older people's physical wellbeing but seem to be uncomfortable at any hint of poor mental health."

Experiences

This report brings together the experiences and ideas from around 500 older people across Scotland, from other people living in their communities and from people who work in support or care services.

Many older people say poor mental wellbeing is still not something that they and other people they know talk about much. People make a distinction between feeling low for a while – which is normal – and this or other symptoms of poor mental health going on for a longer time, which is not good. Talking about it makes it easier for people to ask for support when they need it.

People are clear that poor mental wellbeing is not the same as social isolation and loneliness: they are both important and it will help when people stop putting them together.

Changes in people's lives are often a big factor in people having a period of poor mental wellbeing, such as when someone is bereaved or moves away from the place they know. Many people have learned from their earlier experiences and understand how they cope with loss and change in their later life, although losses are still hard bear. This is an experience that most people living in care homes have had and people find the peer support from other residents helps a lot.

"Loss is part of life. With each loss we learn a bit more about how to cope with that. By the time you are my age you've learned a lot about ways to live with grief."

"I think GPs could do more when older patients are clearly having a hard time – to say 'I know this feels hard but it is normal and it is not a mental illness, let's help you get through it' or 'This is depression and there are things that will help you get better.'"

People

People who are, or have been, carers for relatives and friends said they often have poor mental wellbeing, but they get less support with this than with other aspects of being a family carer.

People who have lived for many years with poor mental health find that the services they get change when they reach 65, even though their health and other needs have not changed. Many people in these circumstances have fewer social contacts and less income than other people, which can make taking part in ordinary activities more difficult.

People living in rural areas have additional difficulties from poor transport and fewer facilities that add to social isolation and limit access to services. Some people find that where they live adds to their wellbeing while it brings more challenges for other people.

"It can be hard when for so long the focus has been on our illnesses and not on our achievements. Services need to change their focus."

"I got advice on how to look after my back when lifting my mum and how to wash her and use the equipment. No-one said 'how do you feel?' They just ignored all of that, even when I was crying."

"I moved here a few years ago after my last stay in hospital. It is a small village and people are friendly. I have not told them about my mental health problems but I think they have worked it out."

"Many of the folk in our group have money problems from the times when we were not working and were not getting the Benefits that we were probably entitled to, so we still have debts and definitely don't have any savings to fall back on."

"I was told I no longer fitted the criteria of a support service that I had used for many years. I went back to my GP and social work, but was told I was too old for every service."

What people are looking for in care and support

- Not having to wait until there is a crisis before getting support.
- Getting the mix of support that helps someone be well now and keep well in the future.
- An equivalent and fair level of services and support for people who are aged under and over 65.
- Continuity in the staff who provide mental health care and other key services.
- No sudden changes in services that are linked to the person's age rather than the support they need.
- Planned and phased transitions between services if there are changes in the team that gives someone support.
- Access to peer support.
- Care and support that understands and supports the role of other people such as family and friends.
- Space and time for workers to have conversations with people when the person is ready for that.
- Better co-ordination between staff working in different services and sectors.
- Services and supports that work for people living in rural areas.

"The people in the city who organise health services have no idea. They cut the outreach service that was much appreciated. Then they give you an early morning appointment when the first bus does not get there until after 11.00."

What helps?

People find that looking after yourself and being resilient enough to cope with life's events matters a lot to their wellbeing. This is reflected in both how people look after themselves and in the support they give to and get from their friends and neighbours. This was raised by people in all the groups and circumstances we came across: older people who live in towns and in rural areas, people living in care homes, people who are family carers and people who have lived with poor mental health for many years.

But a challenge as people get older is that they can lose their ways to cope, for example when they are physically less able or when they lose the people with whom they do these activities.

Supporting other people is another way in which people help their own mental wellbeing. This happens through being a friend and neighbour and in their contacts with family. It also happens when people are part of community activities and for people who become volunteers. Support networks that are designed around explicit peer support are especially important for people who live with more significant mental health problems and for people who share other experiences, such as LGBT+ people and people who share a religion, language or culture.

Older people are in touch with a lot of community-based services that are working well to support people's mental wellbeing. One of the difficulties here can be finding out about them, as there is a lot of variation in whether GPs and staff in other formal services know about or understand the impact these services and community groups have.

The experience of many older people who do get support for their mental wellbeing from GPs and from mental health services is positive. A bigger problem is when formal services are not co-ordinating with each other. People also have ideas on ways the support from services could be improved.

Ordinary community activities are another important part of how people get support for their mental wellbeing. This can be more of a challenge for people who have lived with mental health problems for a long time. Other barriers can include poor information about what is available, getting to activities and costs.

In all these settings it helps when people are able to have good conversations, with enough time to work out how they feel and what they want to say. People used their experiences to say what helps these good conversations to happen.

"I structure my day. Plants in the morning and iPad in the evening, it's a way for me to keep in touch with what's going on in the world."

"Our summer programme is great, but we need this sort of activity all year round."

"This is a friendly area and a good place for older people to live. The staff in shops are very helpful and neighbours give good support to each other."

"The costs for hiring rooms in all the civic places have gone up and we can't afford it – we meet each month instead of each week. It is the same for all the other activities I enjoyed and where I got company. It is having a big impact on my mental wellbeing and I am sure for many other people too."

"You just get passed from pillar to post. It feels that no-one is interested once you reach 65."

"It isn't too bad here, the teams seem to talk to each other, although it still depends on the area you are in."

"More help to manage symptoms and your condition yourself. A lot of us did not have these opportunities before."

"The support we get from the Older People's Team [in the NHS Mental Health Service] is very good. Our volunteers and groups are in touch with many older people. If we feel someone is struggling and maybe could do with some expert help we just talk to the team and they help the person talk to their GP and get access to the services they need. I'm sure they could do with more resources in their team but it doesn't get in the way of them having a lovely manner with people."

"You want to go on feeling valued and having a purpose in life even though other things in your life are changing. But services just see one aspect of your situation. They don't ask what you can contribute to your own wellbeing or to the people around you. They need to start working in that way."

"It's good to feel you have something to contribute, that you are making a difference for other people as well as feeling better in yourself."

Looking ahead

The main support for older people's mental health and wellbeing are ordinary community activities and services – the ones that everyone uses, such as libraries and shops and the ones that are there for all older people. People want to see these services continuing and decisions about the future taking account of the potential impacts for the people who rely on them.

People are clear about the ways formal mental health and care services could work to provide effective, helpful support. They include practical arrangements for services and the approach and culture of mental health services, such as how they understand the experiences older people have had and not creating breaks in services when someone becomes 65. Some of these points are already included in the 2017 Mental Health Strategy for Scotland and people hope to see them being implemented soon.

People want more opportunities to contribute to the strategic plans for the services they use. In most places it feels as if older people's mental health and wellbeing tends to fall between the planning processes, with neither the Older People's planning not the Mental Health planning including them. But there are examples of people being involved in service and/or strategic plans, which show that it can work well.

"People who like you and stick by you – that can be family or friends as well as workers, and services need to remember and support that."

**"Services being willing to change – work more with each other and work with communities."**

"There are great facilities and groups in many areas, but older people with poor mental wellbeing are not told about them even though they could benefit a lot."

"It feels good when someone in a high up job comes and says 'we need to hear what you think will make services work better.' It feels as if they now know that we matter and can help make it right for other people too."

"Another impact from the conversations here has been the Community Centre talking to older people about ways the Centre can be better at including and welcoming them."

Older people have an overall vision for how the future could work to help people have good mental wellbeing when they are older:

- More conversations about older people's mental health and wellbeing.
- Building the confidence and capacity of communities so they work well for older people with poor mental health and wellbeing.
- More prevention and early intervention support.
- Raising awareness among older people and their families about mental health and wellbeing, and making it ok to ask for support.
- Mental health services and services for older people working together.
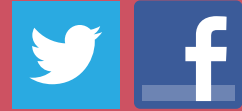
"We are looking for kindness and acceptance."

"Plans for communities that include and support everyone will go a long way to supporting older people's mental health and wellbeing."

"We could learn a lot from the way they are developing dementia-friendly communities and use this approach to benefit the much greater number of older people who experience mental health problems."

"It is good mental health services and welcoming communities – we need both."

"If people did think ahead in as positive a way as possible we could achieve great things."

Thank you to all the people who took part in the conversations, the people who organised the sessions and to the funders of all the projects.

Contact

Outside the Box
Unit 3.10, The Whisky Bond
Dawson Road
Glasgow G4 9SS

T. 0141 419 0451
www.otbds.org

The Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

outside the box