



Ascent



Good Practice Briefing

Psychologically Informed Environments

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AVA (Against Violence and Abuse)
The Foundry, 17 Oval Way, London SE11 5RR
Tel: 020 37525535 Email: info@avaproject.org.uk
Website: www.avaproject.org.uk Twitter: @AVAproject

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Introduction

ASCENT - Support services to organisations

Ascent is a partnership within the London Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Consortium, delivering a range of services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence, under six themes, funded by London Councils.

ASCENT – Support services to organisations, is delivered by a partnership led by the Women’s Resource Centre (WRC) and comprised of five further organisations: AVA, IMKAAN, RESPECT, Rights of Women, and Women and Girls Network.

This second tier support project aims to address the long term sustainability needs of organisations providing services to those affected by sexual and domestic violence on a pan-London basis.

The project seeks to improve the quality of such services across London by providing a range of training and support, including:

- Accredited training
- Expert-led training
- Sustainability training
- Borough surgeries
- BME network
- One-to-one support
- Policy consultations
- Newsletter
- Good practice briefings

Good practice briefings

The purpose of the good practice briefings is to provide organisations supporting those affected by domestic and sexual violence with information to help them become more sustainable and contribute with making their work more effective.

For more information, please see: www.thelondonvawgconsortium.org.uk.

This practice briefing was produced by **AVA (Against Violence and Abuse)** on behalf of the Ascent London VAWG Consortium. AVA is a leading UK charity aimed at ending gender based violence and abuse. We strive to improve services through our learning, resources and consultancy, and end violence against women and girls through our policy, research and prevention work. We have specific expertise on multiple disadvantage and children and young people.

For more information about AVA, please see: www.avaproject.org.uk.

Psychologically Informed Environments

A Psychologically Informed Environment (PIE) “...is one that takes into account the psychological makeup - the thinking, emotions, personalities and past experience- of its participants in the way it operates“ ¹

It is an approach that has been developed in the homelessness sector, focussed particularly on clients who have experienced complex trauma. It also considers the psychological needs of staff: developing skills and knowledge, increasing motivation, job satisfaction and resilience. ²

The purpose of a PIE is to help staff understand where client behaviours are coming from and therefore work more creatively and constructively with challenging behaviours.

A Psychologically Informed Environment³ has 5 key elements:

1. Development of a psychological framework
2. The physical environment and social spaces
3. Staff training and support
4. Managing relationships
5. Evaluation of outcomes

The key objectives of each of these elements are expanded on below.

Key element 1: Development of a Psychological Framework

The aim is to develop a service culture that is reflective, thoughtful and compassionate. To achieve this, staff are introduced to insights and principles from psychological approaches to working with people with complex needs. The aim is for staff to understand, and keep in mind, the connections between thoughts, emotions and behaviour. The organisational commitment to becoming a PIE should also be made clear.

Key element 2: The physical environment and social spaces

The aim is to create a non-institutional, safe and welcoming service that facilitates interaction between staff and clients. Clients should have choice and control over how and when they engage. There should be a sense of physical and emotional safety for both clients and staff, with a culture of health and wellbeing.

Key element 3: Staff Training and Support

The service reflects on its working practices to support continuous improvement. Staff competencies and confidence are developed in working with complex trauma, and all staff share an understanding of complex trauma. Staff manage and reflect in

their own thoughts, emotions and behaviours and those of their clients, feeling confident and supported to work with risk and challenging behaviour.

Key element 4: Managing Relationships

Relationships are recognised as the key tool for change. The impact of positive peer relationships is harnessed and clients with complex needs are not excluded.

Key element 5: Evaluation of outcomes

Outcomes are collated and analysed in order to understand and verify what works and to support continuous learning and improvement. This also enables evidence to be made available to clients, staff and commissioners to increase understanding of the value of psychologically informed approaches.

Additional element: Reflective Practice

It is also worth noting that increasingly practitioners have argued that a better description of PIE would include 6 areas. According to Johnson the sixth area is reflective practice⁴. Group reflective practice is a process of continuous learning from professional experiences.

“There is a robust evidence base demonstrating that teams who regularly meet to reflect on their practice are more effective than those who do not. Furthermore, literature indicates that effective teams achieve better outcomes for their client group”⁵

Relevance to the Domestic Abuse sector

Leaders and practitioners in the domestic abuse sector have been following the development of psychologically informed environments in the homelessness sector carefully, with an eye to their applicability in the domestic abuse sector. This reflects:

- An awareness of the need to improve refuge accommodation and support for women with complex needs, to address the well documented challenges faced by women experiencing a combination of domestic abuse, substance use and mental ill health⁶
- The extent to which the refuge movement shares common values and goals with the underlying principles behind psychologically informed environments, with their emphasis on relationships.
- The fact that some aspects of Psychologically Informed Environment practice, such as clinical supervision, are already present in the good practice developed by some VAWG services.
- A growing understanding of the need to take a trauma informed approach to services supporting women and girls affected by gender based violence and

abuse. For example, the Women's Aid "Change that Lasts" model involves working with specialist domestic violence services to adopt a "strengths-based, needs-led, trauma-informed approach, reflective of the Change That Lasts model"⁷. Whilst a psychologically informed approach can reflect and pull on many different psychological theories and approaches, it is potentially a powerful approach to supporting clients who have experienced high levels of trauma.

- The emphasis on relationships in psychologically informed environments also chimes with what survivors tell us about services. For example, in the AVA survivor consultation⁸ carried out with survivors of domestic and sexual violence who also experienced problematic substance use and/or mental ill health, the most important theme to emerge was the importance of humanity.

Underpinning all of this is a growing awareness that it is vital to understand domestic abuse as a form of trauma. 'Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being'⁹. Domestic abuse certainly fits these criteria and can be exacerbated by the fact that the trauma is perpetrated by someone close to the victim and by the unpredictable nature of abuse. There are many common responses to trauma such as hyper-arousal, numbing, increased startle response, flashbacks, avoidance, sleep problems, anxiety, memory and attention problems, developmental delays and attachment issues to name a few. These are all normal responses to abnormal situations, but can feel very frightening and confusing to those experiencing them. These responses can also raise challenges for staff working to support traumatised survivors, who need the proper training and support to recognise and respond to behaviours that are rooted in trauma responses.

Case Study: "Refuge Access for All"

The "**Refuge Access for All**" project was established in 2016 to provide a model for working to improve access to, and the outcomes for, women and children in refuges with mental health issues who have experienced domestic abuse. It was funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and was a partnership between Solace Women's Aid and the London Boroughs of Enfield, Barnet, Haringey and Camden. It involved training and infrastructural improvements to provide additional support to staff to ensure that Solace Women's Aid is better placed to accept all mental health referrals and sustain a woman's place in the refuge through to successful move on.

The following activities were carried out in delivering the project:

- **Establishment of a steering group** to oversee the project including representatives from each of the participating local authorities, Senior management and project staff from Solace Women's Aid, AVA as the consultant / evaluator, and a member of the Solace Service Users Forum.

- **Partnership meetings took place** to gather intelligence, develop proposals and reach agreements on joint work between mental health, drug and alcohol and refuge services.
- **A review of Solace Policies and Procedures** was carried out by AVA (Against Violence and Abuse)
- **A training programme**, devised and delivered by a Clinical Psychologist was rolled out across the staff team. All refuge workers, refuge managers and the senior management team at Solace received 3 full days of training, on the following subjects:
 - mental health, substance use, counselling techniques and self-care.
 - trauma and the impact it has on mental health
 - trauma and coping mechanisms including drugs/alcohol and self-harming behaviours
- **Reflective Practice** was introduced across the organisation and continues to be embedded into case reviews at refuges to encourage an environment where ongoing learning is undertaken to improve service user experiences and engagement.
- **Compulsory Clinical Supervision** was introduced with attached elements of learning sessions in order to continue the PIE staff training.
- **Play therapy** was introduced for children.

It should be noted that all of this was in addition to established practice at Solace, much of which already reflected psychologically informed principles. This includes a comprehensive internal training programme covering issues including mental health and substance use, optional clinical supervision, and a process of regular case reviews.

The full and final evaluation of the programme will be published by London VAWG Consortium members AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) and Solace Women's Aid during 2017. The initial findings, however, are that the project led to a significant measurable increase in the understanding and confidence of staff in dealing with issues around mental ill health and substance use. Staff also reported feeling more supported in the workplace, in particular around issues of personal mental ill health, trauma and substance use.

Clients also reported measurable improvements on a trauma informed practice scale over a period of only six months, showing an impressive impact on outcomes. The play therapy made a difference in the behaviour and emotional wellbeing of children and their mothers during their stay in the refuge.

The only area of the project where success was more limited was in working with local mental health and substance use services to develop joint protocols and pathways – this was due entirely to overcapacity and lack of resources in those services.

Based on the outcomes of this project, the concept of the Psychologically Informed Environment is applicable to the domestic violence sector, and that the key

components outlined have the potential to have a measurable and transformational impact on clients and staff alike in a short space of time

Conclusion

The concept and practice of psychologically informed environments has met with some success in the homelessness sector, resulting in improvements in client outcomes and staff experience, particularly in working with clients affected by trauma and multiple disadvantage. It is reasonable, bearing in mind the trauma impact of domestic abuse, and the prevalence of women experiencing multiple disadvantage including mental health and substance use issues amongst domestic abuse survivors, to hope these concepts would also be applicable to the domestic abuse sector. Early initiatives, such as the Refuge Access for All project would seem to indicate that this is the case.

References

- ¹ Robin Johnson , co-author of “ Psychologically Informed Services for Homeless People – Good Practice Guide 2012, Department for Communities and Local Government
- ² Creating a Psychologically Informed Environment. Implementation and Assessment. No One Left Out Solutions Ltd. for Westminster City Council 2015
- ³ Psychologically Informed Services for Homeless People- Good Practice Guide, 2012 Department of Communities and Local Government
- ⁴ Private correspondence with Mental Health Foundation, quoted in “Psychologically informed environments: A Literature Review “ Mental Health Foundation Research Paper, 2016.
- ⁵ “Building team-based working: A practical guide to organisational transformation “ West and Markiewicz, 2004
- ⁶ “Case by Case: Refuge Provision in Greater London for survivors of domestic violence who use alcohol and other drugs or have mental health problems” Harvey s, Mandair S & Holly, J (2013)
- ⁷ Womens Aid: “Change that Lasts” 2016, www.womensaid.org.uk
- ⁸ “Treat me like a human being, someone who matters” Holly J and Scalabrino R, AVA July 2010
- ⁹ SAMHSA (2014) Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-informed approach

Resources

In addition to the documents referenced above, the following are useful source material:

- AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) produced this briefing. Material on psychologically informed environments, and trauma informed approaches can be found in the multiple disadvantage section of the AVA website www.avaproject.org.uk. The full and final evaluation of the Refuge Access for All project will also appear here. AVA can also provide training on these issues , including free elearning on complex needs.
- Homeless Link and AVA held a joint seminar for the homelessness and VAWG sectors, and presentations from the day are here : www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/national-projects/london-plus-project/plus-project-presentations-and-resources
- Information about the Work of Solace Women’s Aid can be found at : www.solacewomensaid.org
- “Complicated Matters: a toolkit addressing domestic and sexual violence, substance use and mental ill health” www.avaproject.org.uk