

Should people 'disclose' their experience of mental health problems?

If you've got a diagnosis or a history of a mental health problem, should you tell a potential employer? A team at the Institute of Psychiatry has produced a booklet that in future may help people weigh up the pros and cons and reach an informed decision.

The aim of the booklet is to give people a structured way of working through the advantages and disadvantages of disclosure, when job-seeking and in the workplace.

It is the end result of a first-stage research project and has been piloted with a small number of people. Now the research team is planning a pilot trial to begin to evaluate its success.

Service users and mental health workers recruited through early intervention services run by South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLaM) helped to shape the contents of the new resource. Their testimonies – including service users' personal experience of talking about their diagnosis to employers, friends and family members, and staff's professional experience of supporting people seeking work – gave greater insight into the difficulties surrounding a disclosure decision.

Only about 20 per cent of people with severe mental health problems have a job: previous research has shown that employers are reluctant to hire people with experience of mental illness, and that mental health professionals may not encourage people to look for work – either because they fear it will be too much for them, or because they don't see vocational support as being part of their remit.

The Trustees of SLaM funded the first phase of the 'CORAL' study, and the second phase, including the pilot trial, is being run under the auspices of a large programme of work called SAPPHIRE. This embraces several projects focusing on different aspects of stigma and discrimination against people with mental health problems and has financial support from the National Institute for Health Research.

'The decision to disclose is an important one,' said Elaine Brohan, who led the development of the booklet as part of her PhD. 'Whether to tell an employer and/or work colleagues can be a dilemma.

'If you do talk about your mental health history, you may not get the job. If you never disclose, that means you can't ask for 'reasonable adjustments' to the job that you may be entitled to under the Disability Discrimination Act.

'If you don't disclose, you may also live in fear of being "found out". And there is a risk of dismissal if people do not disclose their diagnosis or mental health history if they are directly asked.'

The pilot trial testing the success of the booklet is due to start in June 2011 and will run for two years. People with experience of mental health problems will be recruited to the research through community-based teams offering employment support and run by SLaM.

originally uploaded onto site 8/2/10,
updated version uploaded 28 February 2011
next update due: June 2013