

Case Study

Ensuring an evidence-based focus on mental well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic

Jackie Williams, Senior Health Promotion Specialist,
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Health Board

BACKGROUND

Jackie Williams currently works for the local Public Health team as a Senior Public Health Practitioner in Gwent, within Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB). Jackie is employed by Public Health Wales but is based within a local team.

She has been working in public health for over 30 years and has been based in the Gwent/ABUHB area for 18 years, working on a variety of topics including mental well-being, suicide, and self-harm prevention.

Regarding her role in promoting mental health and well-being, Jackie provides advice to the Health Board and wider partners on best approaches to promote and protect public mental well-being after considering the evidence available/good practice and understanding the local context.

Additionally, Jackie ensures that the needs of groups of the population at greater risk of poor mental well-being are being addressed by taking a proportionate universalism approach. This ensures that programmes which seek to promote mental well-being also focus on addressing inequalities, and they are not isolating any groups or increasing existing inequalities.

Jackie also prioritises partner and public engagement. She then comes up with appropriate recommendations. These recommendations are then discussed at a more strategic level within the partnership groups and priority areas are identified, seeking support and funding, if appropriate.

AIMS

At the start of the pandemic, the Aneurin Bevan Gwent Public Health team were redeployed to support the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board's response to COVID-19. Jackie's initial role was supporting internal communications for Health Board staff, ensuring they knew about COVID-19 policies, procedures, etc.

Prior to the pandemic, Jackie's role had predominantly focused on promoting mental well-being and suicide prevention. As the pandemic progressed and evidence emerged of the potential negative and disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on population mental well-being, Jackie flagged this significant priority to colleagues. She requested whether she could take time out to reflect, look at the research that was emerging, and come up with a plan on what the Health Board should be doing to address the growing evidence around the consequences of COVID-19 on mental well-being. This proposition was accepted, and Jackie quickly set to work. With new research highlighting additional vulnerable groups and areas of the population that were now at risk of experiencing poor mental well-being, such as front-line staff, Jackie, with the support of her team and Health Board Executives agreed a plan to ensure that the local community had easy access to self-help information and resources and that they could readily promote and protect their mental well-being. This initiative took the form of a website and another member of the local public health team (Emma Palmer) worked with a designer to ensure this product was easily accessible and appropriate for their target audience. A multi-agency editing group ensured the resources it included were evidence-based and consistent with the resources being shared nationally by Welsh Government and Public Health Wales.

In addition to the website, Jackie and her team commissioned an evidence-based workforce mental well-being training programme called Connect 5. This programme is based on the principles of Making Every Contact Count (MECC) and aims to provide the well-being workforces with knowledge, confidence and skills to have effective conversations about mental health.



CHALLENGES

During the pandemic, the local public health team were faced with staff resource related challenges as the team were having to support the Health Board and local partners in the response to COVID-19. The team worked hard in their response and put in many additional hours to ensure their success. Additionally, some members of the team often had to work independently, with limited support, as their managers were extremely busy leading the development of new systems and programmes, such as Test, Trace and Protect Centres and Mass Vaccination Centres.



OUTCOMES

Following on from her work, Jackie is pleased to have achieved an overwhelming amount of support from local partners for a Central Point of Access: a website for mental well-being information and resources. The website: Melo Cymru was launched in January 2021 and has been really well received. It contains a wide range of resources in different formats. It is bilingual and has a tool which enables wider accessibility for people who have low literacy levels, Dyslexia or if English is not their first language.

Additionally, Jackie is pleased that she was able to achieve buy-in from the wider partners for the workforce training programme. A cascade (Train the Trainer) model of Connect 5 was commissioned and to date over 30 local partners have been trained to deliver this training programme within their own organisations. Additional funding was secured to commission Third Sector providers to deliver training to partners who do not have access to in-house trainers. The training programme has been tailored for Gwent workforces and has been rebranded locally as Gwent Connect 5. The ambition is that promotion of mental well-being becomes everyone's business, not just the business of the Health Board and mental health professionals.

Jackie is currently working with large local organisations/workforces to support them to recognise the importance of staff mental well-being and ensuring their workforces can have conversations about it in the workplace rather than referring immediately to GPs or Occupational Health teams.



NEXT STEPS

Looking to the year ahead Jackie is excited as the programme has received much local support, and the team have secured Welsh Government Transformation Funding, in addition to local funding.

The focus for the year ahead is on three priorities. Firstly, increase the accessibility of the website and increase engagement with the resources on the website. The team will be testing digital solutions to increase brand awareness, including launching Melo social media, and working closely with local partners. Secondly, increase access to Gwent Connect 5 training and secure a sustainable model of the training programme. Finally, undertake community engagement with groups of the population at greatest risk of poor mental well-being to ensure that they have access to self-help resources, particularly groups who are digitally excluded.

In tandem, the Team will be engaging as much as they can with local partners and working alongside the Gwent Integrated well-being Networks, to promote system change so that the promotion of mental well-being is seen as everyone's business.

Finally, Jackie notes that the biggest challenge going forward will be to extend the reach of the Foundation Tier/self-help resources through non-digital channels and making sure the information and resources are as accessible to as many groups of the population as possible, particularly those who are at greatest risk of experiencing poor mental health and well-being. Jackie recognises it is much easier to get the information out there via their Melo Cymru website.

"I think the biggest challenge going forward is being able to extend the reach of our self-help information and resources to groups of the population who need them the most. Those who are at greatest risk of poor mental well-being, particularly people who are digitally excluded or do not feel able to prioritise their mental well-being, for whatever reason. It's easy to get the information out there digitally, through our website and through Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, but it's those groups of the population that don't have access [to those avenues that will need it too]. As soon as Lockdown's lifted, something that we're really going to focus on is getting our self-help resources out there physically as widely as possible."

Jackie Williams