Tree of life group as a pre-therapy intervention for clients from black and minority ethnic backgrounds experiencing first-episode psychosis

[South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust]

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1. Background

The relationship between black people and mental health services has been a longstanding source of tension and unanswered questions. Research has documented that individual from black and minority ethnic communities receive differential care in the mental health system, particularly regarding coercive hospital admissions, use of medication, and diagnosis of severe and enduring mental health difficulties. Black service-users have expressed the most dissatisfaction with mental health services, and the stigma of engaging with mental health services can deter people from seeking help. This is a particular concern for people using early intervention services as these clients are typically engaging with mental health services for the first time.

2. What was done

In 2015, a pilot program was launched with the aim of providing an alternative experience for discussing emotional distress in the context of social, cultural, and life experiences. The program used the tree of life (ToL) model, which involves discussing the person's life experiences, talents, hopes, and dreams in a non-judgmental way. The model was designed to act as an introduction to "talking therapies" and be more acceptable than CBTp and FI, which are NICE recommended for people with psychosis.

Participants were recruited via care coordinators, and a group of people who self-identified as being Black African or Black Caribbean (with equal male and female representation) was formed. The group met weekly over four weeks and learned about the ToL model and completed their own trees, which focused on the roots of the tree (family origins), the ground (the person's life at present), the trunk of the tree (things the person is good at), branches of the tree (hopes and dreams), leaves of the tree (people that are important to the person), and fruits (gifts that the person has been given).

3. Result

The outcome of the pilot group was positive, with participants expressing a positive attitude towards mental health services and psychological therapies. 76% expressed positivity towards mental health services, and 80% expressed a positive view of psychological therapies. There was also positive qualitative feedback from participants who found the groups to be beneficial.
The ToL model is now being used on wards as it gives people space for their stories to be listened to and removes hierarchical dynamics between service users and psychologists. It is a useful tool in exploring and discussing different parts of a person's professional identity, strengths, and values. It helps individuals identify areas for

growth and development, set goals, and develop strategies to achieve their aspirations. The Professional Tree of Life can help build confidence, resilience, and a sense of purpose in one's professional life.

In conclusion, the tree of life model has been an effective and useful tool in promoting positive attitudes towards mental health services and facilitating open and non-judgmental discussions about mental health. Its success in the pilot program and subsequent use on wards suggests that it could be a valuable addition to mental health services for people from black and minority ethnic communities.

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4. Appendix

For further information, see Appendix 4.

Further information

This case study has been shared as part of a quality improvement project led by Transformation Partners in Health and Care's (TPHC) Psychological Therapies for Severe Mental Health Problems Programme team.

This project aims to promote the delivery of psychological therapies that are accessible and responsive to the needs of diverse populations. Through an information mapping exercise, the team has gathered information on good practices and interventions that mental health providers have adopted, or are adopting, to make therapies and therapy services more accessible.

To view more case studies and learn more about this programme, please visit the TPHC website.