

## **A Day in the Life of a Mental Health Social Worker....**

Vicki Pratt, Mental Health Social Worker at York City Council reflects on her role.

We are all working and living in unprecedented times with the C19 virus. 'C-19' 'Coronavirus' and 'pandemic' – just a few of the words and phrases that we hear, read and see everywhere now. They are unavoidable and, as much as we try to develop new 'norms' and 'routines' to help us get by day to day and to help manage our own emotional and mental health's, in the midst of Mental Health Awareness week, I have found myself wondering and reflecting on:

- What I am doing to manage my own mental health as a mental health social worker?
- What strategies am I implementing to help myself in the challenge of working from home?
- What am I doing to help realise that the small successes achieved with customers are actually big gains in the field of mental health?
- What am I doing to help realise that I can do this and that I can help others make change?

At 3pm today, having not gone for my morning run as intended, definitely not taken a long enough lunch break and drank too much tea/not enough water, I concluded that I am not practicing what I am preaching to the customers I work with about self-care.

I also recognised that, in the midst of getting stuck into a new secondment and trying to soak up the wealth of knowledge that my colleagues have to offer alongside new processes and ways of working, I was applying reflective practice more to my learning and development and forgetting how it could help me/us recognise the small success we achieve in our day to day practice. The small successes that we might take for granted when working with complex cases in complex time and the successes that, despite sitting being a laptop/desk for more hours in a day than usual, make a big difference to those that we work with.

During the first week of my mental health secondment, I was allocated to a customer who is well known to services and identified to struggle tremendously in developing relationships with new professionals. I was asked to look at their accommodation situation and determine a pathway so that they could have more secure and stable living arrangements; ultimately this would reduce risk, vulnerability and provide stability for them.

Three weeks in and the weekly 'phone catch ups' we scheduled were going well...despite not having met face to face, I thought to myself *'I can do this phone assessment stuff, it's okay'*. However, week four took turn and the phone was slammed down on me mid conversation after I edged out of our usual 'chit chat' territory into plans, expectations and processes around their housing application. Owing to the customers risk and behaviour, on reflection, I recognise now that this situation did leave me feeling anxious, uncertain, out of control and slightly uneasy. Even more so given that their Mental Health formulation and MH Team suggested that I give them space and call next week as planned.

Two days later, I turned my phone on in the morning and a text came through from the customer apologising for putting the phone down on me and explaining why they became upset. At first, I was just happy to read the message so I knew they were 'okay' however, after speaking about this in supervision I was encouraged to reflect on this further and consider how this text can be seen as real positive progress.

The customer hadn't just put the phone down and forgotten about our conversation or me, they had thought about it, possibly spoken to other people/professionals about it, used the strategies that MH services had been helping them to develop and implement for years to help with emotional regulation and behavioural change. Most importantly, they did all this, and they had only ever spoken to me over a phone. Someone who struggles to build relationships with professionals and struggled to regulate their emotions chose to text me - someone whose name they couldn't put a face to.

On reflection, I can now see that this just evidences how, in MH and in many other roles across the Local Authority, we can have a real impact on those we work with. Yes, phone assessments and conversations are hard and will never replace the value and humanistic element of face to face meetings but, they can work, especially if we put the time aside to make them work. We can still build relationships with customers over the phone, even those who are hard to reach. We can still help people move forward to where they want to be...even whilst sat at our makeshift desks at home.

Finally, one last reflection. Again, during the early stages of my secondment, a colleague and I were allocated to a gentleman living in a very neglectful housing situation. Significant concerns were raised around his safety and wellbeing. Our first visit to his home consisted of him either not answering the door or shouting, "go away". However, he eventually came out to speak to us.

Whilst many of our suggestions of 'help' to improve his living environment went unanswered and quickly replaced by topics of conversation that he was in control of, he did eventually agree that we could walk with him to the river and sit with him whilst he fed the squirrels. Again, whilst undertaking the 'social distance' walks to the river in the 5 weeks that followed, conversation was limited to what was within his control, 6 weeks in and the customer has just agreed that we can now support him to clear his vastly overgrown back garden. It was agreed that this would enable him to feed the birds in the summer, have space in the outdoors to sit when his knees hurt and he couldn't walk as far and it would provide space to work in when/if his kitchen was renovated at a later date.

On hearing his agreement to us obtaining quotes for gardening work, my colleague and I were elated with a sense of achievement, especially given the barriers that this gentleman had put up initially and historically when professionals have tried to engage him. However, on reflection, I recognised that surrounding the sense of achievement was feelings of concern, worry and unease.

*Were we focusing on the wrong things? The garden is after all, the tip of the iceberg...* The house needs significant attention. However, when I embarked on this secondment in the mental health team, I was told clearly that managing, holding and working with risk was fundamental to the role...this case is a perfect example of this.

A day in the life of a mental health social worker involves the need to be aware of statutory avenues and actions that can be taken but also, the need to develop and maintain trusting working relationships so that risk can be worked with and managed collaboratively with confidence. Whilst my colleague and I are under no illusion that we have a long way to go before we may be able to cross the threshold of this customer's front door, in times where contact with customers is limited, we have both taken from this that progress and helping people move forward in a positive way is achievable. The walks to the river are an added bonus to my working day as well at the minute!

Having written this piece, it has helped me reflect and recognise that, a day in the life of a mental health social worker, as with any profession and job has its ups and downs, anxieties and worries. However, it's also made me realise that; one of the best ways that I can look after myself/we can look after ourselves in this difficult time is to take the time to reflect and recognise the small (and big!) successes that we achieve each day/week in our jobs.

And now, I am going for that run. As much as I complain, moan and my face goes as red as a tomato two minutes in, it does make me feel better for going!