



WaMH in PC Wales Mental Health in Primary Care Information Sheet 2

A Briefing Note for GPs and Primary Care Practitioners The Impact of Emotional Distress on Health

Emotional distress is a natural response to life events past or present; it can also be a symptom of a social, physical and/or mental health problem. If unresolved, emotional distress can lead to deterioration in relationships and health; this can have a damaging impact on individuals, families and communities.

Emotional distress can lead to:

- Inability to manage normal functions in day-to-day life, including maintaining social, personal and sexual relationships (impacting on family life and performance at work)
- Stress, a sense of failure, low self-worth, and low/absent sex drive
- Use of coping mechanisms such as: self-harm, and alcohol and drug abuse which, in turn, can lead to dependency
- Diagnosed mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and obsessive behaviours
- Physical manifestations of emotional distress through medically unexplained symptoms
- Deterioration in physical health and deterioration in ability to manage long-term medical conditions
- Inability to gain and/or maintain employment
- Misplaced anger leading to violent outbursts.

This in turn has an impact on general practice through:

- Repeat presentations in primary care
- Medical prescribing
- Requests for sickness certification
- Unnecessary investigations for physical health problems
- Poor outcomes for physical health problems and long-term medical conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

Identifying the problem

Some patients will openly disclose to GPs that they are distressed and that this is impacting on their wider health and wellbeing. For patients who do not disclose, the indicators of underlying emotional distress may be:

- Frequent attendances in the GP surgery with symptoms that appear to have no underlying physical cause or illness
- Diagnosed mental health problems
- Recent or complex bereavement
- Relationship problems and/or sexual problems
- Disturbed sleeping patterns and fatigue
- Frequently feeling tearful without apparent reason
- Lapses of concentration and inability to perform usual tasks
- Being easily roused to anger and/or lashing out
- Becoming socially withdrawn.

Helping patients who are affected by emotional distress

Once both the GP and patient recognise that emotional distress is impacting on the patient's health and wellbeing, they then need to work in partnership to consider the best course of action. You may consider the nature and root cause of the problem and whether there is a diagnosable mental health problem or illness. When it comes to treatment and referral there may be different options to choose from, this depends, to some degree, on what services are available in your locality.

Different options may include:

- GP and/or practice support and watchful waiting (monitoring over time before deciding if referral and/or treatment is appropriate)
- Providing and/or signposting to useful information and self-help materials
- Signposting or referral to local support groups and services in the voluntary and community sector
- Referral to a counsellor or a counselling service.

WaMH in PC is working to improve primary care mental health by nurturing:

trust • good communication • person centredness

WaMH in PC

Wales Mental Health in Primary Care

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Referrals to counselling

Access points for counselling services differ across localities, with specific arrangements for referral for each service. The different types of access points include:

- Counsellors and/or psychotherapists based in the GP practice through direct contact with the practice
- NHS-managed counselling services, with counsellors either based in GP practices or a central site, and funded through the Local Health Board
- Voluntary and community sector services contracted to take NHS referrals
- Other counselling services that are not contracted to, or funded by, the NHS, for example: school-based counselling for young people, voluntary and community sector services, counselling services in universities, workplaces and spiritual / pastoral care settings, and independent/private counsellors and psychotherapists.

There are a range of factors to consider when discussing the options available to patients in accessing counselling. Foremost, it is important that patients access services that are appropriate to their needs. Cost is also a consideration; some patients cannot afford to pay for counselling, while patients who can afford private therapy sometimes prefer to choose their own counsellor, independent of the NHS, as this keeps the counselling process separate from their medical record.

Outcomes

Appropriate referral to counselling and psychotherapy can ease the emotional distress of the patient with a positive impact on their social, physical and mental health. This can in turn lead to:

- Reduction in GP consultations, or more appropriate self-referral to their GP
- Reduction in prescribed medication, or more appropriate medication management
- Improved physical health, mental health and wellbeing (counselling can be effective in improving common mental health problems such as depression and is recommended by NICE)
- Improved social and general functioning (impacting on work and family life)
- Improved patient satisfaction

Visit the WaMH in PC website
www.wamhipc.org.uk

Acknowledgements



Information from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP is a charity and professional body with over **33,500 members**. All BACP members are held accountable to the *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy*.

BACP provides information for the public through leaflets and posters in GP practices. To request copies of leaflets and posters for your surgery email:

healthcare@bacp.co.uk

If you, your practice staff, or patients would like more information about counselling visit:

www.counselling.co.uk

Website includes:

- *Find a Therapist* (searchable on-line directory of therapists)
- *'How to get the best out of Your Therapist'* and *'What is Counselling?'* (information sheets)
- Lists of organisations that provide services for a range of problems, such as: relationships, bereavement, sexual abuse, addictions, domestic violence, debt, cancer, mental health and more ...

The above information is also available by calling:

01455 883300

BACP, BACP House, 15 St John's Business Park,
Lutterworth, LE17 4HB

Gold Standard Library

Below is a list of education / support packages developed and released by WaMH in PC as part of the Gold Standard programme of work:

- *Information Sheet, entitled 'Improving Mental Health Outcomes through Sustained Employment'* (released June 2010)
- *Training DVD, entitled 'Getting it Right' - Dealing with Mental Health in Primary Care* (released June 2010)
- *Information Sheet, entitled 'Positive Choices Suicide Prevention Training Framework'* (released October 2010)