

Mental Health Awareness Training Resource

Guidelines for careers advisers working with clients who have mental health difficulties

This staff training resource is one of the outcomes of a HEFCE funded Student Psychological Health Project and was produced collaboratively with the University's Careers Service.

Further information about the project can be obtained by viewing the web-site:

www.le.ac.uk/edsc/sphp

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Guidelines for careers advisers working with clients who have mental health difficulties

Working with clients who have mental health difficulties will often involve the same skills and techniques used to work with any other client group. The purpose of the following guidelines is to identify those techniques that may be particularly useful when working with clients who have mental health difficulties, and to reinforce the value of using them.

1. Promote a positive view of mental health difficulties

People who have mental health difficulties may have experienced discrimination and stigma, which could have left them feeling worried and unsure about you or your service's reaction. Promoting a positive view of mental health issues in publicity about your services, and using language that is not stigmatising, discriminatory or judgemental, may help clients to feel more at ease about disclosing their concerns and their difficulties.

2. Prepare yourself for the work to be done

There is a number of issues specific to working with clients who have mental health difficulties and it is important that you are aware of them and well prepared to discuss them where appropriate. For example, would you be confident in advising a client about:

- how and when to disclose mental health issues to a prospective employer;
- how to present information about time gaps on a CV due to hospital admission;
- your service's policy on confidentiality (including circumstances when this should not be guaranteed);
- legislation which affects people with mental health difficulties such as the Disability Discrimination Act;
- the concept of "reasonable adjustments" in the workplace;
- organisations which support people with mental health difficulties in the workplace?

3. Take time to establish a relationship

Consider ways to help the client feel at ease by perhaps allowing more time than usual for a client to settle in, or structuring your discussions to start and end on a "neutral" topic.

4. Use active listening skills

Using active listening skills during a guidance session may help the client to feel comfortable and encourage them to open up. Try to be sensitive to, and prepared to follow up where appropriate, any clues or leads, both verbal and non-verbal, that a client provides. Offering encouragement, reassurance, positive support and resourcefulness, whilst summarising and reinforcing the key issues is also likely to be helpful.

5. Do not make assumptions about the impact of mental health issues on people's skills and abilities

Mental health difficulties can range from mild to severe, and be temporary, sporadic or chronic. No two people, including people with apparently the same type of difficulty, will be affected in an identical way. It is important, therefore, that you do not make assumptions about a person's mental health difficulties, especially about their likely impact on career choice, planning or progression.

Your client will usually be the best person to judge any impact their difficulty may have, although you can play a valuable role in assisting clients with this. Aim to keep an appropriate balance between encouraging clients to find creative solutions to possible barriers to achieving their potential, and helping them to set their own limits.

6. Aim to empower your clients

Some people who are anxious or have mental health difficulties may find making decisions difficult, but it is important that you aim to enable and encourage clients to have control over their career planning. Establishing clear aims and achievable targets for each part of your work is likely to help with this. Be careful not to allow clients to become reliant or dependent on you.

7. Keep to the boundaries of your role and remit

Be careful to adhere to the boundaries of your role to provide careers advice, and if necessary, proactively guide the discussion in order to do this. To help with this, you may find it useful to take a moment to think before you ask any questions that relate directly to a client's mental health. Be sure that you need to know the information in order to assist the client before making your enquiry. Remember, it is not your role to attempt to resolve the client's mental health difficulties.

8. Know when and to whom to refer

There is a variety of specialist organisations to whom you can refer clients, and you should be aware of the major organisations, and when it would be appropriate to refer. In the education sector, there are usually counselling services or medical centres, and there is a wide variety of local and national organisations and help-lines available.

9. Look after yourself

You may find it useful to reflect personally or debrief with colleagues after a guidance session. Think about areas that you felt were productive as well as identifying aspects that were difficult. Remember to seek advice from other organisations, both within your institution and nationally, if appropriate.