

Effective Interventions Unit

Supporting families and carers of drug users: a review

Summary

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the impact that an individual's drug use can have on other family members, including extended family and friends. Evidence suggests that there is a significant impact on physical and mental health, financial circumstances and family relationships.

The aim of the review was to provide a body of evidence and information to underpin the design and delivery of support to families and carers whether through the statutory sectors, voluntary agencies, or from within the community.

The Evidence

EIU commissioned and carried out a number of exercises to draw together evidence and information on family support including: a literature review; a qualitative study of the views and experience of families and agencies; and a mapping exercise of current provision. EIU also carried out a survey at the National Family Support Conference in June 2002 and a series of interviews with families and service providers. A Reference Group drawn from health, social work and family support groups provided knowledge and expertise to identify key themes for the report.

KEY FINDINGS

From the review, we identified 3 key principles of family support

The prime focus should be to address the need of the family and the carer

Family support services should be open, accessible and non-judgemental

Families and carers should be involved in assessing/identifying needs and designing services

The aim of family support

The overall aim of family support is to limit the harm to family members that can result from their relative's drug use.

There should be a clear distinction between support for the family and support for the drug using relative. DATs, agencies and service providers in all sectors should agree clear aims and objectives for family support services. Families include immediate and extended family, friends, carers and dependent children.

The impact of drug use on families and carers

The evidence gives a consistent picture of the way that drug use impacts on families in 4 key areas:

- Physical and psychological health: affected by the stress of living with the drug user;
- Family relationships: stability within the family becomes more difficult to maintain;
- Finance and employment: affected by helping the drug user with debt, even through theft and violence, and caring for children of the drug user; and
- Social life: restricted either as a result of fear of leaving the house, embarrassment or sheer lack of energy to do something for one's self.

The review is at <http://www.drugmisuse.scot.nhs.uk/eiu/eiu.htm>
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There are significant differences between alcohol and drugs in the stress and strain experienced by families coping with drug misuse because of illegality and associated criminality, level of stigma and level of guilt and shame felt by parents. It was also clear that family members will be affected differently, respond differently and have individual needs.

The Needs of Families and Carers

The evidence shows that the diverse needs of all family members are not well documented, especially those of wider kin such as grandparents and also siblings. Families and carers have a wide range of needs including:

- Information on drugs and the nature and course of addiction and dependency;
- Practical support to help with problems arising from debt, financial hardship and a breakdown of social relationships;
- Emotional support to help with anxiety and stress, particularly in the light of the stigma and negative attitudes that they perceive;
- Support to minimise the effect that the relative's drug use and behaviour can have on them: physically, psychologically and practically.

Specific groups may have specific needs which require different methods of support. These include: carers, including grandparents caring for children of drug misusing parents; young carers who take on the "parenting" role; families in rural and remote areas where stigma may be even greater; ethnic minority groups for whom there may be language and cultural barriers; men, who may be reluctant to seek help; and siblings who may feel isolated and overlooked.

Methods Of Supporting Families

There are a number of methods of support for which there is some evidence of effectiveness. Different types of interventions have different benefits and different types of interventions can complement each other. Methods include:

- Family therapy: which involves working with the family to help the drug user to reduce drug use and to improve family functioning;
- Counselling: which aims to help family members to come to terms with their circumstances and to allow the person to explore their concerns and identify ways of responding to those concerns;
- Parenting skills: which aims to improve trust and communications between family members;
- Respite: which aims to give families and carers the opportunity to get a break away from their everyday situation and to maintain some form of social activity;
- Advocacy: which aims to assist people by giving them confidence to ask questions and receive the care and the services to which they are entitled;

Other methods of support include telephone helplines, befriending, developing personal coping skills and education and information.

Current provision

What families seek support for, and where they seek it, can vary greatly. It may range from informal support from relatives and friends to more formal support from agencies and professionals. These could include GPs and health workers, drug agencies, social work services, family support groups and family support workers.

There are a number of difficulties facing agencies and service providers who wish to offer support to families. One of the main barriers is confidentiality. When agencies are working with the drug user, it may be difficult to respond to the family's need or desire for information about that person's treatment. Discussion about the level of engagement should be part of the assessment process. There are also potential problems arising from lack of resources within the agency to provide dedicated support to family members. Training of staff is a key area for development, so that they may have the appropriate skills to engage with family members.

Strengthening Support to Families and Carers

There are a number of ways to strengthen family support offered by agencies and service providers:

- offer a wider range of support including practical, emotional and financial support where possible.
- commissioners of services and funding providers should consider how to increase the level of resources to agencies to enable them to strengthen support to families
- more effective networking and partnership networking between agencies and service providers, so that they know what other services can offer to families and carers in their area and target resources better to fill gaps in support rather than duplicate effort.
- more evaluation is needed to establish best practice in supporting families and carers.

Family Support Groups

The aim of family support groups is to collectively support each member through difficulties they may be facing within a group setting. For families and carers coping with drug use, family support groups can assist by:

- improving understanding of drug use and its effects upon individuals;
- improving their physical and emotional health through reducing stress and assisting them to cope in less damaging ways; and
- reducing the isolation and loneliness experienced by the individual family member. It can also reduce the sense of responsibility felt by that individual.

Support can take different forms: emotional support, social support, advocacy, information, problem-solving and practical support. It is fundamental to the functioning of a group that support is a two-way process. Members must give and receive support. There are also different types of support groups. They may be open to new members or it may be a closed group that runs for a specific period of time. Some groups have a definite structure and programme but others operate under a much looser format.

Some groups are self-help groups and others are facilitator-led. There are advantages and disadvantages to both of these models.

Some of the challenges which face family support groups are:

- attracting new members;
- getting access to resources and funding, and finding accommodation which is accessible and neutral;
- dealing with concerns about confidentiality and anonymity;
- achieving recognition from key agencies. Without that recognition, family support groups may not be able to participate in decision-making at strategic level.

Strengthening Support to Family Support Groups and Their Members

There are a number of ways in which the work of family support groups could be strengthened:

- access to a wider range of types of support, including more information about drugs and appropriate treatments and opportunities for self-development such as stress management and assertiveness skills.
- DATs and other local agencies could provide information to the family support groups about their activities and services.
- increased resources and financial support to help with the costs of running of the group: e.g. telephone and administrative costs. DATs and other agencies could consider whether they might offer financial support or access to resources.
- the development of local coalitions which can reduce the isolation sometimes felt by family support groups, strengthen the collective voice of family members and enable them to bid jointly for funding to provide services e.g. counselling across an area.
- the forming of a national network of family support groups which would potentially act as a vehicle for sharing good practice between groups, help access to resources and training and raise the profile of family support at a national level.

Key features of effective practice for DATS, agencies and family support groups include:

- agree clear aims and objectives and share them with others
- consult with families and carers to identify what kind of support they need
- develop and deliver suitable training for those engaging directly in family support
- provide user-friendly, comprehensive information about drugs and their effects, treatment and care options and sources of help and support for family members
- constantly monitor and evaluate practice so that best practice can be developed and shared.

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