

What About Faith?

Meeting the Religious Needs of People with Learning Disabilities

SUMMARY

Services for people with learning disabilities should meet the religious needs of people with religious interests. Religious expression is a fundamental human right, and can have important health and lifestyle benefits.

The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities funded an action research project to help services meet the religious needs of adults with learning disabilities. Five services were offered support including a training day and ongoing support for up to a year.

Before the training day, people with learning disabilities and family members highlighted the importance of religion, although services gave religious needs a low priority. By the end of the project, services were routinely including religious issues in everyday service practices, with some services developing person-centred religious needs plans and taking strategic action.

BACKGROUND

The Foundation has championed the importance of spirituality and religion in the lives of people with learning disabilities, including:

- Organising seminars
- Funding a preliminary study¹
- Funding a research project to explore the spiritual needs of people with learning disabilities and how these may be met by different stakeholders²
- Funding the action research project designed to help services meet the religious needs of people with learning disabilities,^{3,4} described in this *Update*.

Religion is one way of expressing a spiritual need, providing ‘shared rituals, narratives, symbols and guidance through scriptures, prayer and modes of social support’.⁵ There are many reasons why services should meet the religious needs of people with learning disabilities. Everyone has a human right of freedom of religion, now part of UK law.⁶ There are traditions within almost all religions emphasising inclusivity,^{1,7} where religious expression is not only about religious belief, but places equal emphasis on an emotional sense of having a relationship with a God or gods, praying, and having a sense of belonging to a religious community.^{1,8}

Religious expression can also have health benefits⁵ and help people achieve valued lifestyles in areas like social inclusion.^{1,7}

Many people with learning disabilities highlight the importance of religion. However, services rarely help people to explore their religion, unless a particular member of staff is motivated.^{1,7,9} There is a need for practical guidance to help services overcome this neglect.

THE PROJECT

The project worked with services to help them meet the religious needs of adults with learning disabilities, using an action research approach where ‘the researcher acts as a facilitator or resource, providing information which helps those making decisions come to an informed choice over alternative courses of action.’¹⁰

Three services in North West England (short-term support, day service support and supported housing) volunteered to take part. Work stopped in one of these sites after unsuccessful attempts to run a training day. The project then worked with two additional sites; a day service for six months and a housing service for two months.

Across the five sites, 42 people with learning disabilities gave their informed consent to participate. There was a good range of gender and age, although religious affiliations were less diverse than anticipated. Staff, managers and family members in the pilot sites and the project advisory group were also active and crucial project participants.

Although the support offered to services was flexible, the following project programme was used as a guide:

- Ten adults with learning disabilities with an interest in religion, and who consented to take part, were identified by the service.
- Within each service, information was gained about people’s religious interests and service responses, using surveys, interviews and focus groups with service users, family members and staff.
- Within each service, all participants with learning disabilities and relevant support staff, service managers and family members were invited to a training day facilitated by the researchers. This training day was run in a workshop format, aiming to improve understanding of religious needs and develop action plans at both service and individual levels. Services also received ongoing support from the researchers to help them develop person-centred religious needs action plans; develop strategically, by incorporating religious issues into routine practice and changing service policies; organise an event at the end of 12 months, to celebrate achievements and identify next steps beyond the life of the project.
- The impact of the project was evaluated by documenting service activities and feedback from service users, family members, staff and managers.

THE FINDINGS

Most participants with learning disabilities expressed strong religious identities. Participants engaged in diverse religious practices, including prayer, watching religious television programmes, religious duties and religious festivals.

Faith agencies could also be important. However, people had mixed experiences of their inclusiveness, with some exclusionary practices having a long-term effect on people’s religious expression.

Meeting people's religious needs was a low priority for services. Services typically ignored religious needs, with some staff feeling that meeting religious needs was not within their remit. Good practice was often dependent on staff who themselves had religious interests.

Training days were conducted in four sites. In one site a training day was not conducted due to a lack of clear organisational support from senior managers. During the training day each service produced a six-month action plan for the service. Small groups also worked with individual service users to discover individual religious needs. Training days were positively evaluated by service users, staff members and family members. Participants valued the mix of information and discussion, the inclusion of service users and the informal atmosphere.

Services developed several ways of meeting people's religious needs, including:

- producing a local resource pack to share information, examples of good practice and contact details
- incorporating religious issues into routine service activities
- celebrating more diverse religious festivals with all service users
- systematically conducting religious needs assessments with all service users
- making contact with local faith agencies.

The two services working with the researchers for 12 months also developed individual action plans according to person-centred planning principles. Although these plans took time to develop, they had a big impact on the lives of service users.

Two sites paid attention to strategic issues, driven by senior managers. This involved setting up informal or formal strategy groups to improve practice, develop policy and review assessment and information systems across the service.

Services taking part in the project found two types of follow-up event useful. Six-monthly half-day events generated reflection on achievements, problems and next steps. One service held a conference a year after the training day to celebrate achievements and share them with staff across the service.

IMPLICATIONS

This action research project demonstrates that services for adults with learning disabilities can improve the way they meet people's religious needs at individual, service and strategic levels. Strong support from senior managers and some extra resources are needed for services to make more significant changes. For services, a big step towards meeting people's religious needs could be taken by routinely including a religious dimension within general person-centred planning. It is also important for faith agencies to become routinely inclusive for people with learning disabilities, as the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) requires.

There are many avenues for future action research in this area, including working with people with complex needs, working with faith agencies and working with self-advocacy groups.

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Another Update on learning disabilities and spirituality has been produced in this volume, see issue 11.

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