

Age-appropriate information about mental health for young carers



What is the initiative?

Listen to Me Young Carers Rucksack Project

Who runs it?

Somerset Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, in partnership with the Somerset Young Carers Project

Who does it benefit?

Children and young people aged 6–16 in Somerset who have relatives in contact with mental health services.

What does it do?

The project engages with children and young people who have relatives in contact with mental health services due to severe or enduring mental health problems. Nurses at psychiatric inpatient units across Somerset hand out rucksacks filled with age-related workbooks, information on mental health, stickers, pens and toys, to young people visiting relatives on the wards in order to improve their experience of mental health services. Some of the young people visiting relatives may be young carers, but the rucksacks are also envisaged to have a preventative effect in that by giving information to families early, their children will be less likely to take on a significant caring role.

When did it start?

2006.

Why was it started?

The Somerset Young Carers Project worked with a small group of young carers whose parents had a mental health diagnosis back in 2006. One theme that was very apparent in their discussions was their often negative experience of visiting

their parents in a hospital setting. Young carers were often uncomfortable about going onto hospital wards and felt anxious not knowing who was a member of staff and who was a patient. It was decided that further work could be carried out to improve their experience.

A Young Carers Project Worker and a Mental Health Social Worker joined forces to develop the Listen to Me rucksack. Offering rucksacks filled with information was something that was both meaningful yet fun. The bags can act as an ice-breaker between hospital staff and the young people visiting the ward and can prompt introductions and conversation. Resources in the rucksack can also encourage patients to talk more to their children about their health and hospital experience.

What are the aims and objectives?

Aims:

- To improve understanding about mental health for young carers and other young people visiting relatives on mental health wards.
- To help facilitate dialogue between children and parents and improve the child-parent relationship in times of parental mental health difficulties.
- To educate healthcare professionals about the impact of parental mental health on children.

Objectives:

- To give young people factual information about mental health.
- To provide age-appropriate support and resources to ease anxieties when young people visit the people they care for in mental health services.
- To enable young people to explore their perceptions of mental health and its wider effects on family relationships.
- To train NHS Trust employees on parental mental health issues and how they can use the Listen to Me rucksacks as a resource in their role.
- To encourage NHS staff to work as holistically as possible with young carers and parents who have mental health problems.

How is it funded?

The Somerset Partnership NHS Foundation Trust donated monies from its charitable fund and other monies were paid via the former Extended Pathfinder programme aimed at improving joint delivery between children's and adult services to achieve better outcomes for young carers.

What has it achieved?

“Listen to Me is a highly innovative way of giving a voice to a group of young people whose fears and anxieties may otherwise go unrecognised.”

The judges of the Dorset and Somerset NHS Awards

The rucksacks not only impart information to the young carers who receive them, they also encourage healthcare staff and parents to listen to them. Indeed, Listen to Me – or empowering young carers to speak up – is one of the key aims of the project. The simple action of a nurse introducing herself to a young carer, handing out a rucksack and asking them if they have any questions has in many cases made a huge difference. Greater contact between ward staff and young carers has allayed young people's anxieties and made them feel more comfortable talking to healthcare professionals and their families about ill health, disability and hospitalisation.

Although there is no formal audit process, there is a great deal of feedback from staff, parents and young people about how much they have enjoyed giving and receiving the resources.

The Listen to Me rucksacks has helped to cement the **Triangle of Care** principles into the everyday working practices of the staff employed at the trust. Young carers are identified earlier than they used to be, are more recognised for their role in helping the patient to get better and more informed about whom to contact should they have any concerns about the wellbeing of the person they care for.

In 2006, when the project began, Listen to Me won a Silver Accolade in the Dorset and Somerset NHS Awards. The project was nominated by the young people who have benefitted from it and it was commended by the judges for its inventiveness.

How have carers been involved in planning and delivering this work?

Young carers were involved in discussions about mental health at Somerset Young Carers Project, which kick-started this project back in 2006. A Young Carers Project Worker and a Mental Health Social Worker worked alongside groups of young carers affected by family mental ill health, to develop resources for the project. Young carers themselves designed a leaflet for recipients of the bag, which gives other young people reassurance that they are not alone and the contact details of organisations which help young carers.

How is the initiative run?

Listen to Me is led by the manager of the Somerset Partnership Carers Services Team, together with one worker from the Somerset Young Carers Project.

At the re-launch in 2011, 500 rucksacks – 250 cream ones for 6–11 year olds and 250 green ones for 12–16 year olds – were purchased and packed with suitable contents, such as colouring books, felt tips and bubbles for the younger children, as well as age-appropriate information on mental health. Each of the five mental health inpatient units then received 100 bags each to distribute to the young people related to the patients on their wards.

Rucksacks are distributed to young people in accordance with a set protocol. Firstly, a parent or other significant adult is made aware of the bag and its purpose before it is issued. Then when a young person visits their parent or other relative on a ward they are given a bag by the staff. The mental health staff will select the appropriate bag according to the age of the young person and take time to explain its contents with the young person. The parents are made aware that the bag was given and staff record the issue of the bag.

As a main objective of the project is for mental health staff to work as holistically as possible with young carers and the adults they care for, staff are given training on how they can support children and young people during their visit and how the bag can be used as a valuable ice-breaker for talking with young carers and their family.

Evaluation of the project is conducted informally through the Family Liaison Workers based in the adult inpatient units and the staff on the wards. Young people are given a questionnaire when they receive a rucksack and adults also get one to complete when they are discharged from hospital. Feedback from these questionnaires informs how the current model is working and if the aims and outcomes of Listen to Me are being achieved for everyone involved.

What methods have been particularly effective?

Meeting with ward staff in person to explain the purpose of the project and the use of the contents of the rucksack has been an effective way of bringing people on board with the initiative.

The two age-appropriate books supplied in the rucksacks have been well-received. These resources are *Minds, Myths and Me* from Gloucestershire Young Carers, for young carers over 11 years old, and *The Wise Mouse* by Virginia Ironside for use with young carers aged 6–11.

Have there been any challenges along the way?

Storing the stuffed rucksacks has been a challenge. They are now stored in cupboard space in the offices of Somerset Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, with as many as possible (usually 30–50) being kept onsite at each of the wards where they are handed out.

Getting feedback forms completed and returned by the young carers is a continuing challenge as completion is voluntary and there may not be much further contact with the young carers. This can be improved if professionals who give out the rucksacks take time to explain the importance of the feedback form as well as talking through the books and other items.

What hints and tips might get me started?

- Look around for the best prices when buying items for the rucksacks and be prepared to bargain. The project in Somerset found a toy store that gave good discounts for buying in bulk, and also ordered in items and delivered them to the project when they said they would shop elsewhere.
- Do not include drinks, sweets or any other perishable items in the rucksacks. The first launch of the rucksacks included them, but as these items eventually exceeded their sell by dates the project decided not to include them in future. Food items may also be unsuitable for some dietary requirements or culturally inappropriate.
- Consider using a production line method to stuff the rucksacks. In Somerset the project set aside one day to pack the rucksacks and got recruits from the Somerset Young Carers Project, the Carers Services Team at the NHS trust and volunteers from Carers UK to form a production line, putting in the various items. By all bringing some food to share for lunch and having a chat it became an enjoyable and rewarding experience for all who took part.

Are there any useful documents or resources that could assist me?

The following are available from the contact below:

- The Listen to Me leaflet.
- A flowchart explaining the protocol of distributing the rucksacks.

The Wise Mouse is available from Young Minds.

Minds, Myths and Me is available from Gloucestershire Young Carers.

Information about the **Triangle of Care initiative** can be found on the **Carers Trust website**.

Where can I get further information?

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