

DIALOGUE+ or genuine dialogue?



Members of a critical mental health group reflect on a new manualised intervention being introduced into UK mental health services

The Care Programme Approach has been a fixture in secondary mental health services in the UK for almost 30 years. It was supposed to place the person at the centre of the assessment, planning, delivery, and evaluation of their own care. Yet, as Julia Buxton wrote in the last issue of *Asylum*, one of the first things that struck her on entering the system was how little interest staff took in her describing her own experiences, or how she felt about them.

Julia is a member of *Critical and Creative Approaches to Mental Health Practice* (CCrAMHP) – a Lancaster-based discussion group that has been meeting over the past 12 years. At a recent meeting, we discussed Dialog+, the successor to the Care Programme Approach. It is in the process of being adopted by our local mental health trust and we've been seeking to understand what that means for people receiving or providing services.

DIALOGUE+ claims to be 'the first approach that has been specifically developed to make routine patient-clinician meetings therapeutically effective'. It is described as a 'full therapeutic intervention' aiming to facilitate conversations with service users about their treatment, hopes and plans.

The DIALOGUE+ scale asks people how satisfied they are with eight key domains of their lives: mental health, physical health, job situation, accommodation, leisure activities, partner/family, friendships, and personal safety. People are also asked to rate how satisfied they are with three areas of their treatment: medication, practical help, and consultations with workers. The ratings are completed and displayed, through use of an app, on a tablet, computer or mobile, and can be compared with previous ratings. After considering the score for subjective quality of life and satisfaction with treatment, the person can then apparently decide which concerns they most want to discuss.

DIALOGUE+ has reportedly been developed in partnership with mental health service users and is claimed to be effective in diverse mental health systems. However, there seems to have been surprisingly little debate about its introduction.

Our members expressed the following concerns:

- It rings some warning bells that Dialog+ has been described as 'a low-cost, potentially cost-saving and generic intervention that requires limited training and no service reorganisation'.

- Our Trust's introduction to the DIALOGUE+ scale assumes that complex feelings are easy to quantify and describe: 'You don't need to write out long responses or give too much detail. Just choose a number from 1 to 7 that best matches how you feel'. The 'just' in that sentence conceals so much.
- The DIALOGUE+ questions might be ok as conversational prompts, but rating your quality of life in a set of predefined areas on a numerical scale doesn't sound like dialogue. It's the kind of thing that bureaucratic systems like because they find them easy to process, regardless of how helpful they actually are to patients.
- It seems to pave the way for a computer to be used in place of a practitioner and erodes the space for genuine conversations to occur, allowing little scope for the articulation of anxieties, ambitions, and dreams.
- It just looks like an app and an algorithm, with someone employed as a middleman to input the info. The manual gives the impression that it's aimed at practitioners without skills, who can't engage in actual dialogue without a manual and bizarre scoring system.

Whether or not these concerns prove to be well-founded, using the word 'dialogue' in this context sounds like the latest instance of co-option by mental health services of a potentially radical idea. For example, many of us believe that *Open Dialogue*, the Finnish approach that is currently being trialled in the UK, has the potential to challenge the ways in which UK mental health services are organised and delivered. Will we be told we don't need Open Dialogue in Lancashire because we already have Dialogue+? ■

The CCrAMHP group meets regularly in Lancaster and on-line www.ccramp.org.uk

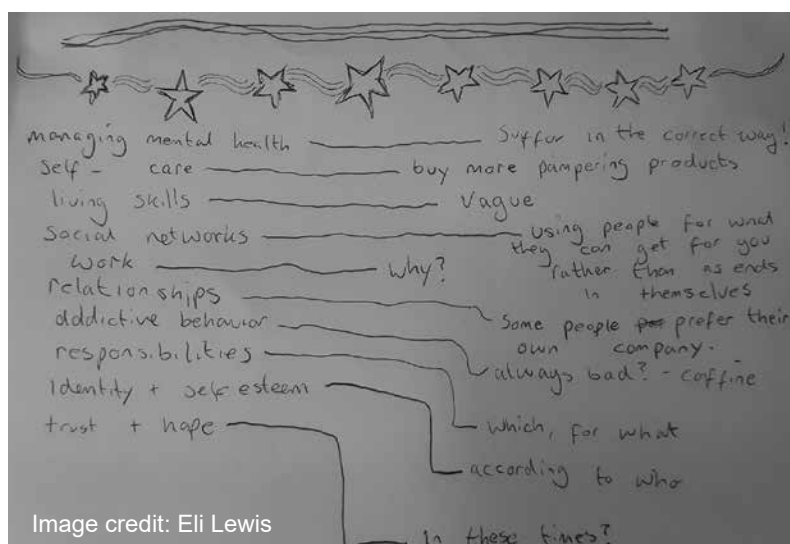


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