

Foreword



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The last decade has seen extraordinary changes and an unprecedented level of investment in mental health services in this country. England now has one of the most sophisticated, well resourced and complex mental health care systems in the world. And yet, those using these services continue to tell us that we still often fail to provide them with the kind of support that they really need as individuals.

For some time, I have believed that if we are to truly improve the experience of those with mental health problems, then the answers will not lie simply in investing more money, recruiting more staff or developing ever more sophisticated service models and systems. What I believe we need to do next is to question many of the fundamental beliefs and ideas that underpin our current mental health systems, and the approaches taken by individual practitioners working within them.

One needs only the briefest of conversations with colleagues working in our contemporary mental health system to uncover a serious level of confusion about the most basic concepts of what the services and the staff working in them are there to do. Seemingly simple questions often stimulate quite a surprising level of debate such as what we believe mental health to be, our understanding of mental illness, and what we consider the responsibilities of the state, mental health services and individual professionals should be, in relation to those with mental health problems.

This workbook brings together the thoughts and ideas of a range of people who have contributed to the work of the Whole Life Programme over the last few years. Through the Whole Life Programme we have worked with individuals from local areas across the East of England and in the South West to explore alternative ways of developing their local mental health care systems. This exploration has included participation in an exchange programme with mental health services in five other European countries, active debates about our attitudes and beliefs and many changes to actual service delivery.

Often, when introducing a workshop or presentation on Whole Life, I have begun the session by asking participants to tell me a story. I ask them to describe to me a time when they have been able, as professionals, to support someone in a way that reflects why they aspired to work in the mental health system in the first place.

I never fail to be impressed by how these stories from individual staff, working in all professions and all locations, represent best practice already demanded by some government policy, professional training manual, or by anyone in the service user movement. The only conclusion I can draw from this, is that the continuing gap between what is described as 'best practice' and 'everyday common practice', cannot be attributed solely to ignorance or poor discipline in individuals.

More commonly, what staff have described to me is an incredible lack of clarity regarding what is expected of them as individual practitioners. They also describe a sense of their conflicting responsibilities towards the individuals they work with, the mental health services and

systems that they work in, and the communities that they serve.

We have found that much of the territory we needed to explore through the Whole Life Programme has been surprisingly difficult to conceptualise and articulate. We therefore believe that in order for our thinking about mental health and the role of mental health services to progress further, a completely new discourse is required; one that provides the platform for a more progressive, pioneering and open minded approach to supporting individuals with mental health problems to reach their full potential.

At the time of writing, there is evidence of this debate emerging in many settings and through the work of a range of national and international agencies. These include the World Health Organisation (WHO), European Commission, Department of Health and The Royal College of Psychiatrists.

This workbook is offered as a contribution to this emerging debate. It is accompanied by a range of further supporting materials also produced and published as part of the Whole Life Programme by the Eastern Development Centre. These other materials include a 20 minute training DVD, the 'Playing it Forward' Well-being CD, a website and further publicity materials.

I do hope that the material in the workbook inspires you as much as it has me to continue to question every day what we do, and to really change the thinking, change the practice and change the system.