

So What is 'Social Inclusion' and Why Does it Matter?

by Malcolm Barrett

Social Inclusion

Well, I don't know about you, but I do have a view about how I'd like life for me and my friends and loved ones to be. Thing is, that view changes depending on how I feel, what's happening in my life, what's going on in the world around me and what my mood's like at any given time. Sound familiar?

So what is Social Inclusion then? Well, I'll tell you what I think Social 'Exclusion' is... I think Social 'Exclusion' is about discrimination, lack of human rights, being prevented from taking part in ordinary daily life by virtue of lack of money, education, work, access to people, places, and things.

So what does it mean to be socially included? The clue is in the word 'Social'. I think it means from a societal perspective, ensuring that people who have been marginalized, discriminated against, or excluded, have greater access and ability to participate in decisions that affect their lives and what they may aspire to do or be. This is about the fundamental human right to have a sense of Well-being, a sense of purpose and to be connected.

In the world we live in there is a lot of talk these days about 'choice'. But to have 'choice' you first have to be 'included'. That means having your voice heard and, more importantly and as a consequence, the opportunity to act on the choices you express.

There is increasing evidence of what can work to assist people in reconnecting to the world... to be included. This can be achieved through volunteering or work opportunities, through access to education or life skills, through access to friends and the opportunity to participate, through choice, in your community.

Frankly, to be given the chance to do what works for you. To have something to engage with and look forward to.

Is this not true for all human kind?

Working in the field of Social Inclusion, as I have for many years, now also leads me to think about what it means to be socially responsible. That in itself is another huge question, but if we want a society where people are not excluded then there are some hard questions we all need to ask ourselves.

For example, what kind of society do we want? What are the burning issues that face us? Who out there cares about those issues? If we care, where does the responsibility lay? What can we do to raise awareness and promote responsibility in the communities in which we live?

It's my view that to end exclusion we need to consider more carefully some of these wider questions.

Changes in the Health and Social system means there is an opportunity to do things differently. The challenge is... do we want to?

If we truly want to empower people then we have to give power up. We have to work harder to work with people and hear and see their aspirations, to support people in the struggle for inclusion. This requires big system change.

This requires powerful advocates. It requires a strong voice from people in receipt of services, strong service user movement.

We need to make good mental health everybody's business. This way we can eradicate the stigma associated with having a mental

health problem, we can feel healthier in ourselves as individuals and as a society.

Is it really too much to expect that a system set up to assist people with their health and Well-being takes on the challenge to work with people's whole lives? To see people as more than just a diagnosis? As being the recipient of 'treatment'?

Through the Social Inclusion agenda there is a fantastic opportunity to do things differently and to lead the way in challenging old practices and beliefs. And things are certainly changing. The recognition that it's not in anyone's interest to have a society where exclusion is acceptable has led to a raft of policy initiatives which, bit by bit, are having an impact on the way people think about what it is to be socially included.

We must stay awake and alert to those changing challenges, and also seek to influence those changes through an individual and collective voice which celebrates success and points the finger at unhelpful practice and processes.

My mood is a little better today after having the opportunity to express these views. I feel connected. I hope you do too.