

Reflective Space – A trauma-informed case study

Hayley

Hi Rebecca, thank you so much for taking part in the case study. If you just want to tell people a little bit about who you are in your role, that would be great.

Rebecca

Hi there, I'm Rebecca Isherwood-Smith. I'm an occupational therapist by background. My current role is a clinical and managerial lead for Surrey Heath MHICS which is a primary care mental health service. We are an integrated team, which means we have different employers and we work together to deliver our service to the local community.

Hayley

Can you tell me a bit about what first drew you to being interested in trauma-informed approaches?

Rebecca

I've held an interest in trauma-informed approaches for some time now. I completed the trauma-informed training and was part of the action learning set. In the early days of our trust creating a trauma-informed care team, I supported and line managed the people with lived experience in practitioner roles. I have a special interest in staff wellbeing and wanted to look at how to maintain staff wellbeing in a trauma-informed way.

While I was a recovery college service manager, which is a co-produced service, I focus my thesis on leadership styles that support healthy workplace environments. I'm also an Athena team journey coach, so my skillset aligns well with trauma-informed principles.

Hayley

Wow, so a real range of experience there and background in trauma-informed approaches. How did that background and interest lead you into the change that you've made within your team?

Rebecca

When I started in this role as the clinical managerial lead, I conducted a series of team exercises. And this included creating team operating principles, which is basically ground rules of how we want to relate to each other as a team. What do we need to pay attention to? And we took time to get to know each other's particular strengths and interests. So we were starting a change from a very strong foundation.

And with regards to this specific change I'm talking about today, I'd picked up from different conversations with staff that there was a shared feeling of how their roles were impacting on their own mental health and having considered the trauma-informed principles I put to the team,

whether they would be interested in creating an hours' protected time once a month for a reflective space where we could share some of our experiences.

And they all said yes, and were as keen as I was to evaluate this as a trauma-informed project. In fact, they created the questions for the pre and post evaluation.

Hayley

That was great. It sounds like they were really involved in setting up this reflective space. Can you just tell me a little bit more about what the reflective space is?

Rebecca

Yeah, sure. We so the reflective space, so we have it for an hour once a month and we've chosen topics for each session. And these are chosen during, building up to that particular session. So some of the examples I've got is that we looked at compassion fatigue moral distress and burnout, that was as a result when the team were expressing feelings of exhaustion. Not feeling good enough as practitioners.

And a member of the team introduced the idea of a jar of hope. So the team, and it's a physical jar, so it's the jar of hope, and the team wrote on slips of paper a hope they have for themselves as a practitioner, and a hope they have for the team. And this has been used twice now, and we still have many hopes to share in future sessions.

We also looked at impact of trauma stories, so the team shared the impact of other people's trauma on their own life stories and we've shared different ways of managing this. And the next one, we are thinking about a day in the life of which is one of the wishes that came out of the jar of hope. It's about us continuing to learn about each other's roles especially as it's a constantly evolving service. So the administrators are gonna begin first. And then we'll hear from our lived experience practitioner our community connectors mental health wellbeing practitioners, and our mental health practitioners. So all the team are gonna have a go at explaining a day in the life of their role.

Hayley

That sounds fantastic. It sounds like a really safe, supportive space for the team and I love that idea of a jar of hope. I really, I want that, I want a jar of hope. Just thinking about it sounds like a little bit like reflective practice, but a bit different was that a conscious thing to make it different to reflective practice?

Rebecca

Yeah I specifically didn't call it reflective practice as I wanted it to be owned by the team rather than having an external facilitator come in, because that immediately changes the dynamics. It makes it more formal somehow. You can feel the shift of change in the room. You can feel it when the, when the power dynamic changes and actually having a reflective space and for the team to really own it and shape it themselves.

It feels so much more powerful and it really fits with this particular team.

Hayley

That's really helpful. Thank you making that distinction between the two. So, thinking back to the trauma-informed approaches, tell me how the reflective space has drawn upon those trauma-informed principles.

Rebecca

Yeah. Thinking about the principles of safety the reflective space provides a consistent and predictable environment where staff feel emotionally secure and having a dedicated space acknowledges that processing difficult clinical experiences requires psychological safety. And we know that staff need to feel safe in order to express vulnerability without fear of judgment or professional consequences.

Another principle of trustworthiness and transparency so having regular scheduled sessions help build trust through reliability and the clear boundaries and expectations about confidentiality within the space also helps with the trust.

The principle of peer support the group setting enable staff to hear that they're not alone in their experiences and we know that shared experiences can reduce shame and isolation.

And the principle of collaboration this reflective space was developed in response to staff conversations. It's not a target or an imposed change. And the team were keen to participate in the evaluation knowing that their voice matters. I believe that any power dynamics are flattened in the reflective space we are there as mental health practitioners and we share our experiences regardless of our position.

And thinking about the empowerment, voice and choice principle team members have choice in their level of participation in the reflective space. And the space in that staff to acknowledge and address their own mental health needs and there's recognition that staff insights about their own wellbeing are valuable to us all.

And the final principle of cultural, historical, and gender issues this reflective space acknowledges the unique stresses of mental health work. It recognises that healthcare workers may have their own trauma stories and it considers the systemic challenges within NHS mental health services and thinking about moral distress, not being able to provide a service that someone may need.

Hayley

That's so helpful to have those principles mapped out and really see how that space is informed by those and that they're in mind. How have the team found it being in the reflective space? Have you had any feedback at all?

Rebecca

Yeah, the team have really responded positively and they share their experiences openly. And I've made a note of some of the feedback that people have said to me which includes; "I thought I was the only one to feel like that".

And another person said, "I think I also have experienced compassion fatigue. I've just not heard that phrase before".

"I've worked in teams where conversations are had between a select group of people, but in this team, we all talk openly together there aren't any cliques, we all join in and share our thoughts as much as we feel comfortable in doing. It's the first time I've been in a team like this."

And my own reflections include how inspired I am. That the team have embraced this space and made it their own. The energy and the commitment they've made shows me how valued this space is for the team.

Hayley

It sounds like this has really been a change that's valued by the team and they're really on board.

Were there any barriers to creating this change and thinking, if you were to do it again, would you do anything differently?

Rebecca

I think the only barrier in the end was me which was a bit of a shocker. But I was very focused on trying to book a separate room, so there was a clear distinction from other meetings we have on the same day, and it really bothered me. There weren't any rooms, but the team told me they weren't bothered by it at all. And in fact some of them commented that they felt it'd be more disruptive to move the rooms.

So what we did, we agreed that we would have a 10 minute coffee break to mark the end of one meeting, and then when we arrived back into the room we'd turn off the computers in the phones so we can make the most of our protected time.

Things I'd do differently. I think it would be more about the evaluation. So as a team, we all, thought about the pre and post questionnaires and, thought about all those questions and that, that process was really helpful. And when we were all completing it, it was thinking, gosh, when you fill out a questionnaire and some of the questions you think it doesn't quite fit what I'm thinking. It doesn't quite fit. This was painfully accurate to how we were all feeling.

So it was such a different experience completing something like that. But where I could do something different is how to rate those. So we did a scale of one to 10. But, I think I would do that differently. Keep the questions the same, but rate it in a different way so that we can demonstrate any change more effectively.

Hayley

That's really helpful reflection, especially thinking about that evaluation piece early on and making sure we know what the impact is of the changes we make. What's next for this change for the reflective space?

Rebecca

I think we're well on the way to embed the reflective space in our, 'this is how we do things' here, team culture. I've role modelled how to ensure the space remains safe and listened out for issues that may need to be taken outside of the space. And the person may be supported individually or through other support structures such as 'Here For You'.

So after initially creating the boundaries of the reflective space, I was keen for the team to shape how they used this space. So it organically became semi-structured, which means topics of discussion are chosen by the team between sessions, so they're relevant to where people are at the time.

Hayley

That's fantastic and sounds like another example of how the team are really taking ownership of how they use that space, which is great. Thinking about other people who might be listening to the case study and they might be thinking, I want to make a change that's trauma-informed, or I want to make the reflective space. What are your top tips for people thinking about making that change?

Rebecca

Yeah, first of all, go for it I think, a lot of things we kind of plan so much and don't do because we, you can't anticipate sometimes what kind of comes out of things. And as I mentioned, with this reflective space, it's organically grown and the team shape it, so it's constantly moving and evolving. So don't be frightened of that process. I would, really go for it.

But I think what's really necessary and vital is that any proposed change in the team needs to be immediately identifiable as something that's done with their wellbeing in mind.

It's vital that the team are totally involved in the process and they can help shape the change and really learn from my experience, it's just to step out of what you think is right as the leader and the manager like the room thing that I was obsessed with and truly listen to what the team would find helpful.

What the team had to say

Team feedback 1

Hello there. My name's Vina. I'm the lived experience practitioner for Surrey Heath. I find the reflective meetings really valuable they're a space where we can talk openly and freely. About our

experiences in our role, our experiences with patients, what things come up for us and other people get to share either similar experiences or offer some advice or just some support.

For instance, I'd never heard of compassion fatigue at all. And it was something I'd felt, but I couldn't put a name to it at all. I didn't really know how to articulate how I was feeling. I just knew that, after seeing certain people that it would have quite a profound effect on me and it's through the reflective space I learned what this is. And I felt a lot better, I felt like a real weight had lifted, especially hearing other people's story regarding the same thing.

Team feedback 2

Hi. My name's Marlon. And I'm a lived experience practitioner, and compassion fatigue is, yeah it's something I'd never really heard of before but when I, what's explained to me when we have our little reflective practice it's brought to my light that, yeah. Feeling emotional and physically exhausted, with regards to the work and the stress and the trauma that we deal with day in and day out. Which has left, myself feeling helpless and feeling drained which caused on, massive kind of like anxiety moving forward. But. As a group it's a great thing to discuss and not feel like you're on your own. And having that support and people's understanding is, has helped a lot.

It feels like my voice is being heard and supported. And it empathise, in, in what, I was going through. And it's really good to empathise with, what others were dealing with as well. So I'm glad that we get to talk about it because, when we go home, it was something that you couldn't offload or feel like no one would understand. So this is great that we can talk about it. It's helped me move forward and have that confidence to go back into my work. And do what I need to do in a very confidence in a strong way. Yeah, this is, this has been very useful.

Team feedback 3

It is lovely to be able to open up to our colleagues and feel that it's a safe environment where we all share similar feelings, thoughts, and insecurities.

Team feedback 4

I've been able to use reflective space to share my own relevant experience with the team in order to help inform our care as a team. This can range from neuro diversity to mental health and medication issues. I value this as a way to create open dialogue and strengthen the bonds within our team while also finding support and improving knowledge overall to deliver better care to clients.

Team feedback 5

The reflective space has been so important for me on a personal level, uh, as a practitioner but also just within the team to help us learn, grow, and develop and allow us to talk about those work related issues that have been problematic or stressful or difficult. And having that shared experience within, within the team within the reflective space, which has been really important I sort of feel as well that it's, it's allowed us to maybe talk about some certain aspects of our role that have maybe been difficult or we've maybe avoided at times or have maybe even found overwhelming.

And I think because of that we've only learned and grew as a team and, developed really well. So I believe it's, um, invaluable having the reflective space. Also, I feel the confidence within many. Has, has grown. I believe that the team in its working abilities has grown as well. Um, and it's been great having that reflective space and hopefully it will continue I also feel on a personal level, I believe it's had, a real good impact on my self-worth and my self-belief and just really having that time to explore some complex cases some hopes, wishes for the team in terms of moving forward during a time. Where change is imminent and, um, I believe the reflective space is only gonna allow us to move forward in a positive way during this time of change.