

Health Champions

“Having the insight into other’s life, you begin to appreciate your life, and you look at how much you’re growing. For me, when I talk about healing, by giving out to others, what’s been coming back to me is self-love, self-awareness, self-care, self-realisation.”

Experience of a Health Champion who worked with us on the project



The problem

People with a diagnosis such as schizophrenia can struggle with managing their physical health alongside their mental health. They can want to make changes to their physical health like losing weight or being more physically active but find this difficult.

Our response

South London and Maudsley NHS FT Volunteer Manager, Isobel Mdudu, thought that there could be a role for volunteers to provide support for people with their physical health and the idea for Health Champions was born. Health Champions are volunteers who are given special training and supported by a Volunteer Coordinator in South London and Maudsley NHS FT. Their role is to support people who have a diagnosis of serious mental illness and are using Community Mental Health Services to manage their physical health. This support is based on the person's own goals for their physical health.

We undertook a research study to evaluate whether having a Health Champion had any impact on how people managed their physical health and whether it impacted on any other aspects of their life. We were also interested in understanding what needs to be in place for the Health Champions intervention to take place successfully.

What we did

We undertook a pilot randomised controlled feasibility trial where participants were randomised to either receiving the Health Champion intervention (intervention group) or to have treatment as usual (control group). Health Champions were paired individually with someone using mental health services and supported them for nine months. This support was mainly once a week for one hour. The person was encouraged to let the Health Champion know what their physical health goals were so that they could support them with this.

Health Champions were recruited from existing South London and Maudsley NHS FT volunteers and by advertising across King's Health Partners, King's College London and other organisations such as Good Gym. Health Champions were given training and we provided monthly group supervision and individual support from a Volunteer Coordinator and the research team. We recruited service user participants from Community Mental Health Teams across the four boroughs covered by South London and Maudsley NHS FT.

What we evaluated

We wanted to find out

1. Did having a Health Champion have an impact on the person's life?
2. Were we able to implement the intervention well?

What we found

We recruited 48 service user participants; 27 participants were paired with a Health Champion (intervention group) and 21 participants received their usual care (control group).

1. Did having a Health Champion impact on the persons' life?
The people who had a Health Champion overall had a positive experience and some people told us that had made changes to their physical health which included losing weight, no longer being pre-diabetic, being more physically active and making positive changes to their lifestyle. People also said that they had made other changes including going out more and feeling more confident.

2. Were we able to implement the intervention well?
Participants and Health Champions told us that they enjoyed taking part and found it easy to do so.

What participants told us

'Just talking to someone, being able to share, that was really nice, being able to trust someone.'

'Seeing (My Health Champion) has made me more confident and more happy and healthier.'

'I knew I had something that I had to do, rather than sitting at home feeling unmotivated and couldn't be bothered to do anything. I actually had a goal to meet the health champion or to receive a call from her.'

'It helped with my self-confidence and encouragement to do things and to turn negative things round to being positive.'

'It actually was quite brilliant because I think I would have slipped back into not going out completely, just not gone out anywhere at all whatsoever.'

What our Health Champions told us

'My experience of being a Health Champion, it was a big learning experience. I learnt more about mental health illness, I learnt about how people cope with it, the help that people get for it, and I learnt more about people who are actually going through it and how it's affected them, but yet they still know how to smile, they still know how to be with the family and stuff.'

'It was a great experience for me, for someone that's always been super passionate about mental health, psychology and physical wellbeing as well.'

Key learning

People who had a Health Champion enjoyed the experience and were able to make the changes they wanted. They liked that the Health Champion was someone independent of services and felt they had a different relationship with them which was really supportive. Both participants and Health Champions felt that they benefited from taking part in the intervention.