

All voices welcome

Arlene Audergon and Jean-Claude Audergon outline CFOR's vision to support awareness of mental health as a community issue...

Back in 1988, we began teaching Process Oriented Psychology developed by Dr. Arnold Mindell¹ in the UK, and were invited to teach at a psychiatric hospital. We led four day seminars usually twice a year at the hospital for over 10 years. Participants were in-patients from the hospital, out-patients, psychiatrists, mental health professionals, students and other interested community members. It was an exciting time, with everyone learning together.

We focused on how to support people in extreme experiences associated with mental health disorders, such as depression, mania, panic and anxiety, hearing voices, addictions and eating disorders. We explored the seeds of something creative in even the most disturbing experiences. We also related to people in their personal and family stories of trauma and abuse. Over these years, we became acutely aware of how the stigma of society reinforces mental health difficulties. One feature of these seminars was the opportunity for large group dialogue about these essential issues.

Forums

This evolved into the idea of setting up community forums to discuss mental health as a community issue. They were attended by people who experienced mental health difficulties, their families, carers, mental health professionals and other interested community members such as community police or housing. Over the years, there were several large community mental health forums in Haywards Heath, Leicester, and Norwich. With very positive response, CFOR is now developing resources and training facilitators to be able to do more of this work within the community.

How is mental health a community issue?

- Mental health problems of individuals are deeply influenced by attitudes in the community. A lot of people who suffer from mental health difficulties say that their worst suffering does not actually come from the emotional or behavioural changes or upsets that brought the diagnosis of a mental disorder, but rather from the negative attitudes towards them and their experiences in the community. They experience prejudice, fear and disdain, and so feel marginalised;
- Mental health services, clinics and hospitals treating people with mental health problems cannot act in isolation from the community at large. They need opportunities to interface with the larger community;
- People who work in mental health services often feel marginal and isolated too. They are overworked, and the important work they do is undervalued in society. They need opportunities to meet with one another to explore

and contribute their expertise and concern to improve the mental health of communities;

- People with mental health issues often carry concerns about a wide range of social issues that belong to the community as a whole. They need support to voice these concerns, and for their concerns to be heard within the community. Mental health disturbances may link with a range of other issues, including discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation and cultural diversity;
- People with mental health needs also have ideas and resources for improving mental health services in their community;
- The whole community suffers from isolation when some of its members do not feel welcome. All of us in the community feel isolated when we do not feel we contribute actively towards community improvement for those in need and get to know our part of the problem;
- Many different groups of people within our community, such as youth, elderly or the homeless, also have mental health needs.

Creating a community

Community forums don't resolve the wide problems around mental health and mental health services. Rather, they support the community, create connection, relationships and the creativity of the community. The whole community suffers from isolation when some of its members are marginalised. Talking together about attitudes to mental health can be invigorating, leading to involvement and contribution at all levels in mental health services and caring for the mental health of our community.

For more information about CFOR forums on conflict resolution and community building, visit www.cfor.info.

'Deep Democracy Where Fields Meet' is an international conference April 26th-28th 2007, featuring presentations and round-tables on mental health and social marginalization. www.iapop-conference2007.org

See www.rspopuk.com and www.iapop.com for books by Dr. Arnold Mindell, and information about Process Oriented Psychology in the UK and internationally.

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