

**Teaching Notes for The Consumer Dialogue Project: Changing MSW
Students' Attitudes Towards People with Mental Illness**
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This material will be useful to students in a mental health track, who already have a foundation understanding of severe and persistent mental illnesses, and who have been introduced to the concepts of stigma, consumerism, and recovery.

Ideally, a consumer (I.e. an individual with severe and persistent mental illness) should be present to co-lead the discussion.

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Discussion Question

How are people with mental illness portrayed in the media? The arts?
In what ways do mental health systems and the people working in them perpetuate negative attitudes? Act them out on consumers?

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References

- ¹Fraser, M. (1994). Educating the public about mental illness: What will it take to get the job done? *Innovations & Research*, 3, 29-31.
- ²Jaffe, Y., Maoz, B., Avram, L. (1979). Mental hospital experience, classroom instruction and change in conceptions and attitudes towards mental illness. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 52, 253-258.
- ³Keane, M. (1991). Acceptance vs. rejection: Nursing students' attitudes about mental illness. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, 27, 13-18.
- ⁴Keane, M. (1990). Contemporary beliefs about mental illness among medical students: Implications for education and practice. *Academic Psychiatry*, 14, 172-177.
- ⁵Drolen, C. (1993). The effect of educational setting on student opinions of mental illness. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 29, 223-234.
- ⁶Penn, D., Guynan, K., Daily, T., Spaulding, W., Garbin, C., Sullivan, M. (1994). Dispelling the stigma of schizophrenia: What sort of information is best? *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 20, 567-577.
- ⁷Desforges, D., Lord, C., Ramsey, S., Mason, J., Van Leewen, M., West, S., Lepper, M. (1991). Effects of structured cooperative contact on changing negative attitudes towards stigmatized social groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 531-544.

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Describe dialogue to students. Ask if any have participated in such a process either formally or informally.

References

¹Center for Mental Health Services. (1997). Consumers and psychiatrists in dialogue. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

²Center for Mental Health Services. (1998). Consumers and psychologists in dialogue. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

³Center for Mental Health Services. (1999). Mental health consumers and psychiatric-mental health nurses in dialogue. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

⁴Center for Mental Health Services. (2000). Consumers and social workers in dialogue. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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The following is a description of a project done at the UNC SSW.

Reference

Scheyett, A. & Kim, M. "Can We Talk?": Using Structured Dialogues to Shift Student Attitudes Towards Persons with Mental Illness. Submitted for publication.

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Students were first and second year MSW students who volunteered because of interest in the project.

Consumers were recruited through the state's Mental Health Consumer Organization.

The facilitation was a Master's level mental health professional who was not faculty for the students. An additional person took notes on the events of the dialogue.

The day was full, but with many breaks--important for consumers.

Recommendations focused on ways students and consumers could work together to improve the system, and ways the social work curriculum could be improved to better prepare students to work with consumers.

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The facilitator began each section of the dialogue with an opening question around one of the themes, then allowed the discussion to evolve, with gentle guidance around relevance and timeframes.

Discussion Questions

What sorts of issues would you have raised had you been part of the dialogue?
What questions do you have, or what would you like consumers to understand about social workers?

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In addition to the discussion and recommendations produced by the dialogue itself, students were asked to complete three attitudinal surveys around mental illness immediately prior to the dialogue, and again within three days following the dialogue.

Within a week after the dialogue each student was interviewed by a Ph.D. student who had not been present at the dialogue, using a semi-structured interview format.

Activity

Have students complete the three scales for themselves. Without sharing their actual scores, then have them discuss the following questions:

What scale questions were the hardest for you to answer? What made them hard?
Were there any questions that raised issues you had never considered before around consumers? What were they?

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Reference

Penn, D., Guynan, K., Daily, T., Spaulding, W., Garbin, C., Sullivan, M.
(1994). Dispelling the stigma of schizophrenia: What sort of information is best? *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 20, 567-577.

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Discussion Question

What do you think it was about the dialogue process that shifted student attitudes?

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In follow up interviews students talked about learning how important a caring, honest partnership relationship is for consumers, and expressed some confusion around how that messed with professional training around boundaries.

Students also expressed surprise at the level of recovery possible, and the strengths demonstrated by consumers, even in the face of some very difficult stigmatizing experiences.

Several students expressed increased interest in working with consumers as a result of the experience.

Discussion Question

In the dialogue, consumers emphasized the importance of a partnership relationship with social workers, where the social worker is “real” and honest. How can a social worker do that, and maintain appropriate professional boundaries? What are some examples of things you feel are ok or not ok?

Would you talk about the following with consumer clients?

- your children
- that you're having a bad day?
- that you're in the middle of a divorce?

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Students and consumers were very enthusiastic about ongoing partnerships within social work education.

Discussion Question

What are some other ways you might want to include consumers in your educational process?