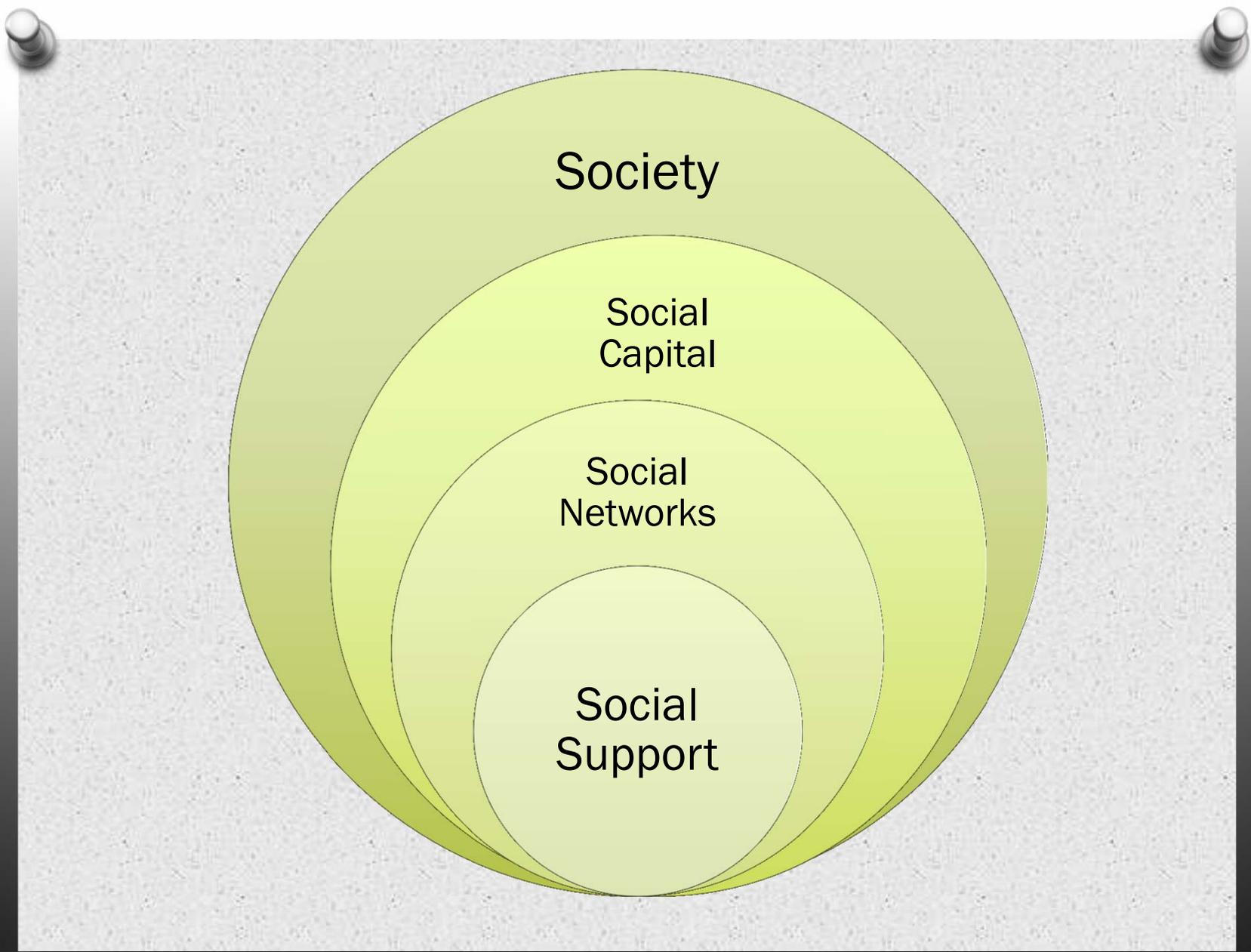




# Social Support for Mental Health

How it might help service users access  
education and employment

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Society

Social  
Capital

Social  
Networks

Social  
Support

# Mental health and isolation

Even when a person has a 'social network' of people they know, they can feel lonely if those relationships are unsupportive or, worse still, actually detrimental to their wellbeing (Segrin and Passalacqua, 2010).

# Impact of loneliness

- Loneliness is associated with increased risk of a wide range of cognitive and mental health problems. Also with poorer physical health and reduced life expectancy, particularly in relation to an increased risk of cardio-vascular problems (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010).
- The absence of close confiding relationships has been found to be a significant factor in predicting depression and anxiety (Harrison et al., 1999)

# The social context

- o 84% of respondents (people who had used mental health services in the UK) felt isolated. This contrasted with 29% of the general population who identified themselves as isolated. MIND (2004)
- o In 1982 59% of respondents (general population) said that at least one of their neighbours often called in for a chat, by 2010 this had dropped to 22%. The same study found that the average number of neighbours known by name had dropped from thirteen to seven (Mayo, 2010).

# Stigma and social exclusion

A survey of over 3,000 UK mental health service users reported that stigma had a negative effect on the lives of 87% of respondents, and 73% indicated that they had stopped doing various activities because of fear of stigma.

(Corry, 2008).

# Social support

- o 'Quite often talking is the best form of therapy and having someone who knows you, who you can confide in and can talk back to you on a personal level based on the fact they know you, can sometimes be very comforting.'
- o 'I could not survive without the day to day support of my neighbours and friends. They help my daily functioning and control my money and medication.'

(Respondents to Open University survey, 2011)

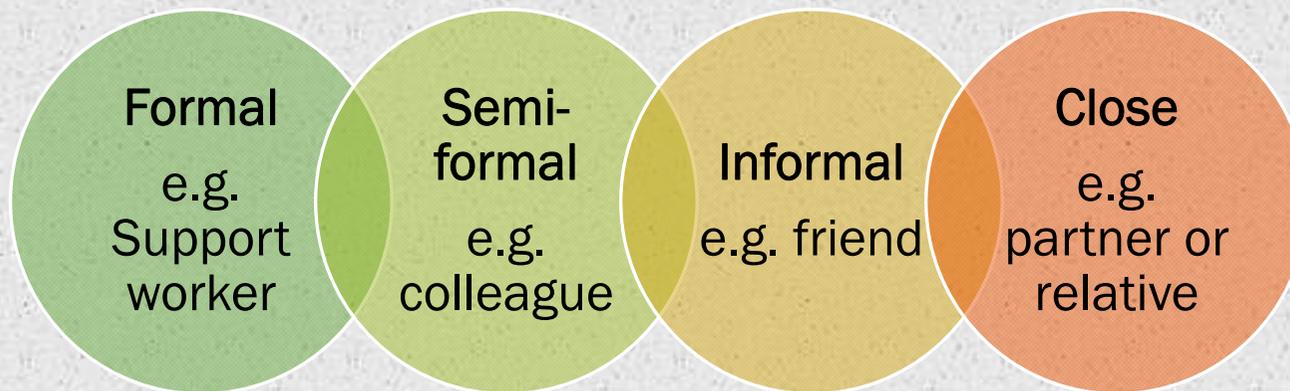
# Positive impact of social support

- o Brown et al.(1986) showed the role of social support in protecting working class house wives from depression.
- o Whitehall II Study Team (2004) – longitudinal study found that an increase in social support led to improvement in mental health of employees
- o RSA (2013) ‘Communities Connected’ action research project. Mapping social networks and mental well-being in seven neighbourhoods in England then working to increase connectedness and to stimulate community assets.

# Five elements of social support

- o engaging in friendship,
- o providing emotional support,
- o constructing meaning,
- o offering practical advice
- o giving material assistance.

# Range of social support



# Friendship

Graham Allan (2010) points to the key role of friendship in affirming a person's identity;

- o friendships are often chosen and nurtured because they help each party to maintain a similar world view and to reinforce their self-images.
- o Friendships also seem to develop between people with a similar economic and social status and for hierarchies to be avoided in these relationships.
- o Reciprocity is important in sustaining friendships as it helps maintain equality in the relationship.

# Peer support

‘Some friends and family were very supportive, but without fully understanding the problem I was having. Some friends were less than welcoming to me... Since being involved with services and meeting like people, I have made a number of new friends who have been an enormous support and have been able to empathise with me.’

(Respondent to Open University survey, 2011)

# Emotional support

Key components:

- o listening,
- o showing empathy and concern
- o acceptance
- o perhaps trying to lift the person's mood

(Faulkner and Layzell, 2001)

- o Sophisticated comforting messages are the most effective as they are focused on the recipient's needs and show sympathy and understanding of their situation.
- o By contrast, non-sophisticated messages are largely focused on the giver's perspective on the situation and are influenced by their need to provide interpretations and to dispense advice.

(Burleson, 1994)

# Constructing meaning

- o '... sharing experiences to help me understand what I was going through, and how to make sense of it.'
- o 'Colleagues supported my difficulties in remembering or comprehending what was required of me. They were grateful for anything I was able to achieve and encouraged me when I stumbled.'

(Respondents to Open University survey, 2011)

# Practical advice

- o 'Other people who have not experienced the full extent of a mental health problem can think that it is just like when they are feeling down, so they may not offer appropriate support or advice.'

(Student in Leach, 2004)

- o 'People have talked to me. I can't be sure they listened. Lots of advice.'

(Respondent to Open University survey, 2011)

# Material assistance

- Examples: help with finances, transport, fixing things, learning new skills
- Can be empowering - enabling a 'normal life'
- How it is given is important – sense of empathy
- Can make some people feel uncomfortable through lack of reciprocity

# Three types of 'caring' relationships

- o Positive – the person is seen as an individual rather than being defined by their problems. 'Carer' also looks after their own needs.
- o Emotionally over-involved – can take on too much and become over-protective. 'Carer' can neglect their own needs.
- o Critical or hostile – the person tends to be defined by their problems which are viewed as typical of them and for which they are to blame. 'Carer' may feel resentful, angry and depressed.

(Kuipers et al., 2010)

# Risks involved in social support

- o Confidentiality and trust
- o Catastrophising
- o Disempowering relationships
- o Spoiling friendships
- o Inappropriate advice
- o Unclear boundaries

# Social support in education

- Friendship – enabling social relationships with fellow students and accessibility to staff
- Emotional support – listening to concerns, providing reassurance
- Constructing meaning – support in becoming a student and maintaining a sense of optimism and self-efficacy
- Offering practical advice – managing learning and assessment processes, developing academic skills, signposting to support services
- Giving material assistance – ensuring financial, residential, transport and other basic needs are met

# Social support in employment

- o Friendship – enabling social relationships with colleagues and positive contact with managers
- o Emotional support – listening to concerns, providing reassurance
- o Constructing meaning – support in becoming a particular type of worker and maintaining a sense of optimism and self-efficacy
- o Offering practical advice – developing required skills, problem-solving on the job
- o Giving material assistance – ensuring the person is equipped to do the job in a suitable environment

# Role of employment support worker

- o Not too conspicuous in the workplace
- o Encourage the development of circles of support in the workplace
- o Provide a supportive presence in the background
- o Be prepared to undertake troubleshooting mediation activities
- o Support service users in challenging stigma



# Social support compared to therapy

‘What this student wanted was to be listened to by someone who really cared about her, not the kind of relationship you get in a counselling situation.’

(Student respondent, Leach 2004)

Talking Therapy	Social Support
Time-limited sessions	More open-ended
Takes place in clinical settings	Occurs in natural situations
Informed by theory and accredited training	Based on informal skills and life experiences
Clear boundaries	Boundaries less defined
Builds therapeutic alliance	Builds friendly relationship
May try to give meaning to experiences	May try to give meaning to experiences
Is likely to be focused on bringing about change	May focus on supporting change
Is likely to avoid giving direct advice	May involve giving advice and guidance

# Relevant aspects of social support to your role?

- o Engaging in friendship,
- o providing emotional support,
- o constructing meaning,
- o offering practical advice
- o giving material assistance.

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