

Peer Mentoring Women with Complex needs, research interests and accredited training programme

There is a sizeable population of women in England who experience significant disadvantage, with overlapping complex and multiple needs. Over a million women in England have experienced physical and sexual abuse in both childhood and as an adult (Scott and McManus, 2016). Many experience multiple disadvantages such as homelessness, addictions, imprisonment or experience mental health conditions. The feminist discourse of domestic abuse directs that 'gender based abuse requires a gender specific response,' (Houghton, 2006: 84). A history of what could be described as 'peer support' within the women's movement has been documented since the first refuges and support groups were formed relating to those escaping abusive relationships (Doerner and Lab, 2017: 18). Women's campaigning and grass root groups continue to lobby government to prioritize work with this group of women, commending the commissioning and appropriate funding of holistic, gender specific and trauma informed support for the most marginalized women (McManus, Scott and Sosenko, 2016; Covington et al., 2008).

One such method of engaging women with complex needs could be the use of a peer mentor, defined by Clinks (2012) as, '*someone with the same shared experience providing knowledge, experience, or emotional, social or practical help*'. Examples of peer mentoring can be found in substance misuse treatment services, in domestic and sexual abuse fields, within the criminal justice process, or in mental health treatment services. Based on their own lived experiences, peer mentors are considered to have a high credibility regarding the empathy afforded to their mentees (White, 2000; Jackson, 2001). When our own Cohort 4 women survive and thrive after their own lived experiences of abuse and disadvantage, and only when they feel safe and strong enough to support other women, they can choose to receive our accredited training programme to be safely able to peer mentor others. They are considered to be experts by experience, and valuable in terms of their ability to use their experience to help other women.

As well as Founding Director, Operations & Risk Manager at Cohort 4, I am a Senior Lecturer in domestic violence at the University of Worcester and I am in the process of undertaking a PhD at Anglia Ruskin in Cambridge. I will be specifically examining peer mentoring with women with multiple and complex needs in England. Peer mentoring is a slowly growing area of practice with a range of population groups that are considered vulnerable or stigmatised (Buck, 2017). Yet there remains little written that evaluates the process of peer mentoring with women. There is minimal literature that examines whether, or indeed if, it is effective for women beneficiaries with multiple and complex needs. Over the last five years of Cohort 4 I have seen peer mentoring at its best, and have also noted the challenges and sometimes failures of the approach. However, I remain interested in the potential to develop

community peer mentors to best help those with multiple and complex needs. At Cohort 4 we call this, '*Women Supporting Women*,' enabling those of us who survive abusive histories, to pull a silver thread from our experiences, and use this expertise to help other women.

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