

Information for Carers

Family Work

For service-users affected by psychosis or bipolar disorder and their relatives, friends and carers. What is family work, who it is for, and how can I access this type of support?

Who is 'family work' for? Family work is an approach for supporting people diagnosed with psychotic disorders (such as schizophrenia) or bipolar disorder, and the significant people around them. It therefore actively involves the person's carers. Trained family workers, who are also mental health professionals, work collaboratively with family members, including the person who uses mental health services. Although it is referred to as family work, the definition of 'family' is broad: it can be helpful for couples and larger families; for people living with family, independently, or in supported accommodation. It can involve anyone who is significant in the service user's life - relatives (including children), friends, neighbours, support workers, or hostel staff. Sometimes these people can still be supported with family work even if the service user does not wish to be involved.

What does family work involve? Fortnightly sessions, usually at the family home, are facilitated by two family workers who take a positive, non-blaming attitude towards the family's difficulties. Together, the workers and the family members try to find new ways of coping and effective solutions to the problems faced.

While the workers bring expertise to these sessions, so too do all family members, and the person experiencing mental health problems is seen as a particular expert in relation to those specific difficulties. Family work emphasises finding practical solutions to day-to-day problems. Family members are encouraged to identify the issues that are currently problematic. With the support of workers, the family develops their ability to use problem

solving to address these issues. There is also an emphasis on improving communication to enable the family to develop more helpful ways of interacting with each other.

Hopefully, by the end of the work the family feels more confident in solving problems together, which should mean less stress for everyone.

How long does it last? This can vary. Some families mainly need information and advice, and this may take only a few sessions. For other families more sessions may be helpful if they have identified a number of problems they want to work on. How long the family work lasts will be decided by the family and the workers together, but there is the option to meet for up to six months.

Does it work? Research trials have shown family work to be effective, and family work is recommended by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). This means that most families should find family work helpful in addressing at least some of their difficulties.

How to access family work Most family workers are located in community mental health teams (CMHTs) or Early Intervention Services. You can either request a referral from the care-coordinator or psychiatrist, or contact the family workers in your mental health team directly. Once the referral is made the family workers will usually suggest an initial meeting to talk about the approach and the types of issues you may want to work on. If the family and the workers together decide that the approach could be helpful there may sometimes be a wait of a few months before this can begin. If this is the case some information and advice will be given to help support you in the meantime.

Source: SWLStG Trust