

Help and Tips for being an effective advocate

ON LINE RESOURCES

No 6 in the series

Being an Effective Mental Health Advocate

Useful Tips for your Self Development

Undertaking advocacy activities can be very rewarding, giving you a sense of achievement and real empowerment. It is a privilege to represent others and ourselves from a mental health consumer or carer perspective and as such when we decide to become advocates, we have a responsibility to speak up, be heard and be respected in the role. Being an advocate also carries with it some personal risks. Putting yourself forward, being exposed to new situations, expressing your views can be challenging and at times quite stressful. There will be times when you need to think about your own emotional and mental health and whether this is the right time for you to be advocating.

The great thing about advocacy in mental health is that there is always a great amount of empathy and understanding when you put your hand up and say "I need to step away for this role for a little while" the language we consumer and carer advocates use is being aware of our own self care.

Here is a simple analogy:

Perhaps you have watched the flight attendants demonstrate how to put on the air mask in the case of an emergency on a plane flight, the flight attendant will tell you to put on your own mask first before you assist anyone else, our suggestion is very similar, as a mental health advocate you need to take care of yourself first, this can feel very strange for some people who naturally want to put other people first. Simply if you don't have the mask on first you will not be able to assist (advocate) on behalf of others.

7 Great suggestions for Mental Health Consumer and Carer Advocates

Great idea No 1 - Self-Care Requires Self-Management

Planning and Preparing as part of your Advocacy Role

Various mental health advocacy roles require you to have skills and abilities you may already use in other parts of your life, ideally you need to be someone that understands the need to plan and prepare in advance. You will also most likely have a personal strength of being a pretty determined individual and that is important because you may be asked to commit to a role or group for quite a period of time.

Key Points

Your personal planning and preparation is important. Ask yourself these following questions:

- Do I feel prepared and confident that I will be able to help with the issue?
- Am I clear about how much I am prepared to do?
- Can I say NO if I find myself feeling overwhelmed?

Something to Consider

We need to recognise that not all mental health advocacy activity will succeed

Overcome any risk of personal fear or perception of failure by firstly acknowledging that you might be unsuccessful in your mental health advocacy role some of the time. Recognise that not succeeding, despite your best efforts, is OK and happens to all mental health advocates.

You are not the failure, see it as an opportunity to learn from the situation, it can at times provide you with an opportunity to be more objective and see things from other perspectives.

- Advocacy needs to include the knowledge that change will come in time
- It may be that your activity cannot be directly measured as an immediate success
- It takes time, we cannot change the world overnight
- It may be necessary to adopt an attitude of patience

Great idea No 2 - Self Care requires Self Awareness

Identify your own barriers

Set realistic goals and expectations for yourself and others. This is part of caring for your wellbeing. Sometimes people create their own barriers. They create difficulties for themselves in their attitudes and their fears. Be aware of your current biases and potential stereotypes you have that could limit your advocacy success.

Think about your own knowledge, and make sure that you are striking a reasonable balance between stretching yourself and stressing yourself. A little bit of stress used positively is not a bad thing at all, it creates a momentum to get things done, however, negative stress that stops your energy is not healthy so be aware when what you are doing no longer feels pleasurable but a burden, it is then you will recognise you are tipping into unhealthy stress in your role as a mental health advocate. Put up your hand for help and work out what self-care you may need.

Key Points

- Take stock of where your knowledge and skills can improve, find a mentor that can help you develop further
- Become aware of what you believe in and why, what you feel, then way you think
- Consider some stress reduction activities that work for you such as:
 - o Have ways of distracting yourself, ie read a book, draw, meditate, listen to music
 - o Actively take a break or time out, this can be brief,
 - o or it may need you to take some time away from your work
 - o Pace yourself. Get in touch with yourself. Know when you are usually not at your best and when your energy is at its lowest
 - o Stop rushing
 - o Put things in priority order. Sort out what you are going to do and when you are going to do it
 - o Maintain your own energy and interests
 - o Avoid burn-out (lack of energy and enthusiasm, anger and frustration, a sense of futility, lack of goals, interrupted sleep, health issues)

Something to Consider

Create person boundaries

Sometimes advocacy activities are very demanding. We need to be honest with ourselves about how much we are prepared to extend ourselves. Decide what boundaries you are going to create for yourself before you commence.

Great idea No 3 - Self Care requires Reflective Thinking Time

It can be really tempting at times to share your views and your personal lived experience story anytime someone will listen, the desire to be heard, validated and understood can at times be very seductive (particularly if you have not felt heard by various people previously) Be sure that you don't jump in too quickly with your views and ideas and think carefully about what people are asking from you be it in a group, committee or even within a mental health setting and consider all requests for your thoughts from various perspectives.

Don't accidentally give yourself a reputation as someone who talks for the sake of talking, perhaps write your ideas down first, let a few other people speak first so you get the 'vibe' of what others are talking about, don't apologise and feel put on the spot if you are not ready to speak, ask for more time to consider the question or request.

Key points

- Take time out for reflection
- Listen to and understand yourself
- Look back and see how much you have achieved to reach this point
- Praise yourself for what you are doing

Great idea No 4 - Self Care requires Emotional Self Control

Self validation vs others validation

If you don't value what you are doing and understand why what you are doing will make a difference you may find yourself wanting others to validate you, well this may not happen so the suggestion is to learn how to value yourself.

Understand what triggers you emotionally is really important so you can plan and prepare yourself mentally to stay more neutral in such circumstances, lets discuss some emotional experiences that many mental health advocates experience.

Fear

Fear and anger are always present in advocacy. Your feelings are not a problem but ignoring them can become one. Everyone experiences fear, strong feelings can be aroused by injustice and inequality and recognise that these feelings are common to everyone at some stage or another. How much they show them is a matter of self-control. The more confident you are in yourself and what you are doing, the more you can achieve without your fears getting in the way.

Anger

Often controlled anger can be the catalyst for change but make sure you de-personalise it. Like fear, the first thing to know is that it's OK. People seem to have two problems with anger that are not useful. One is to not express it, the other is to express it aggressively. Holding in anger and not expressing it, is a poor idea. Consider finding ways to acknowledge your anger. Try to remain rational about the situation. Consider whether your expectations of personal achievement in advocacy are rational. Are you angry because you haven't achieved your goals in a situation where it may never have been possible? Are you placing unrealistic expectations on other people? Maybe the circumstances are such that it is just too difficult to obtain a favourable response to your expectations. Remember the old saying, we don't know what we don't know!

Key points

- You may be afraid of the whole situation or only a part. Focussing on what the fear is and understanding the drivers will make it easier to overcome
- Plan and anticipate possible scenarios, assess the best and worst things that can happen
- Consider strategies for achieving best outcomes
- Prepare well – gain as much information as possible
- Undertake advocacy activities that you feel are important and manageable
- Be clear about the advocacy activities and role
- Learn to tolerate your own frustration
- Increase awareness and acceptance of the rights of others
- Don't be consumer by the issue – move on before consumption leads to bitterness
- Maintain a cooperative outlook

Great idea No 5 - Self Care requires Good Communication Skills

Often mental health advocacy means being able to influence and persuade a current view, to an alternative viewpoint, it may involve direct and assertive communications with people who have the means to improve a situation. Mental health advocates that have a good reputation understand the difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness. A cornerstone to good communication is the art of listening to understand other views and insights, being able to demonstrate that you have respectfully heard and then adding your perspective to the communication.

Key points

- Stay focused and clear about what you are striving for
- Be fully prepared – focus, plan, organise and rehearse
- Be consistent, authentic and genuine
- Separate the issues from yourself despite your passion
- Learn to actively listen
- Learn assertion over confrontation
- Stick to fact and evidence as much as possible

Great idea No 6 - Self Care requires some Self Promotion

It is quite legitimate to demonstrate your strengths and talents in advocacy and to have them acknowledged. If you bring ideas and insights to your role that is valued by others, then celebrate this fact. The role of consumer and carer advocacy in the development and improvement of the mental health sector, its systems, and practices cannot be underestimated and we need to promote the benefits of meaningful inclusion of the consumer and carer voice as often as possible.

Key points

- Stay dedicated and interested in the areas that light your passion
- Share your achievements, especially with other consumer and carer advocates
- Acknowledge that achievements often come with hard work
- Continue to develop your knowledge of the issues, stay contemporary
- Use an opportunity to advocate when you find yourself in the right place at the right time
- Consider writing for a publication as a mental health consumer and/or carer advocate

Great idea No 7 - Self Care requires Personal Self Care

All advocacy activity requires a level of personal commitment and effort. Remember, you want the images of consumers and carers to be positive.

Organise your time to create balance between looking after yourself and your advocacy activities. Be mindful of the need to attend to the ordinary things like shopping and house work.

Adopt a stance or attitude about mutual respect is fundamental to getting what you want and to looking after yourself. Self-respect is born out of treating others with the same dignity, consideration and patience that you would expect.

Develop ways to gain support

It is very important to develop pathways of support and this is about not being alone and being able to share in a safe and comfortable setting. Personal support can come from almost anyone, sometimes it is about talking through the issues, sometimes it is about being in the right environment that enable you to feel good about yourself.

One of the best types of support can be provided by a 'buddy' This is a fellow consumer or carer whom you trust implicitly that all information you share about yourself will be kept confidential.

A buddy can also be provided by an organisation specialising in supporting consumer and carer representatives or by the organisation, which has asked you to provide your perspective.

Key points

- Use support as a way to empowerment
- Don't put yourself in the position of needing to be 'rescued'
- Maintain your role and purpose
- Set limits on your time and work
- Have your contribution recognised
- Stop people being dependent on you
- Discuss any issues
- Recognise your own limits and establish mutually rewarding relationships
- If you are employed, ensure there is a clear line of command

The content of this Resource has been taken from the publication:

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The Network acknowledges the source of material for this resource as The Kit, the advocacy we choose to do. A resource kit for consumers of mental health services and family carers published by the Australian Government in June 1998. While the Network has taken care in the development of the content, it is not responsible for any action taken in response to it. Consumers of the resource are advised to seek help from their GP, mental health support worker or Lifeline if they are distressed by the contents.

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