Lay summary of the research

What is important when setting up a new team of support staff?

Some people with mild intellectual disabilities or borderline intellectual functioning exhibit severe challenging behavior, such as aggressive behavior toward support staff. For this reason, they often need to move from one care facility to another. This means many changes and constantly new support staff. To improve the quality of life of these people, care organizations sometimes start a new home - including a new team of support staff. A study by the Academic Collaborative Centre Living with an Intellectual Disability (AWVB, Tranzo, Tilburg University) shows what service users, support staff, psychologists, and a team leader consider important in this area.

Research design

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in the study are or have been involved as service users, support staff, psychologists, or a team leader in the project Pro: a collaboration between care organizations ASVZ, Pluryn, and Trajectum, care administration offices VGZ and Zilveren Kruis, and the Center for Consultation and Expertise (CCE). Within the project Pro, six residential homes with new teams of support staff have been set up for 24 people with mild intellectual disabilities or borderline intellectual functioning and complex care needs. Pro aims to offer these people as normal a life as possible and to prevent exclusion and transfers by focusing on 1) unconditionality in terms of residence and the support relationship, and 2) an orthopedagogical approach: tailoring the environment as much as possible to service users' needs.

CONCEPT MAPPING

The knowledge and experience gained by service users, support staff, psychologists, and the team leader at Pro were collected using the 'concept mapping' method. Each group of participants answered the question of what is important when setting up a new team of support staff. Next, the participants used these answers to complete two tasks. A group of professionals with extensive knowledge of challenging behavior and support teams in long-term care analyzed the concept maps.

Results

Service users

Service users value a good relationship with support staff most of all. To this end, they find it important that support staff are reliable and clear, get to know you, make agreements together with you, and meet you before the transfer to the new home. Service users also find it important that support staff offer security, for example by remaining calm in tense situations and engaging in conversation. Service users also want to feel welcome in their new place of residence, with a good structure, activities, and at least the same freedoms they had before. In addition, service users find it important that support staff continue to work at the residential home for a longer period of time and that extra support staff are present when a new service user arrives. According to them, this helps in dealing with tension and getting to know each other.

Support staff

For support staff, team safety is most important. They also value support and involvement from the manager, team leader, and psychologist. According to support staff, the conditions a team should meet are: being confident, familiar with the target group, and a good balance on the team and during each shift between experienced support staff and support staff in training. They also consider good preparation to be important, such as following training and meeting new service users prior to the move. Agreements, the division of roles, and the long-term plan must also be clear to support staff in advance. According to support staff, creating a positive image of the new home is necessary to recruit future colleagues.

Psychologists and team leader

For the psychologists and team leader, working from the same vision with shared and guiding principles across the organization is central. In their view, it is important to see the positive aspects and needs of service users. Another focus for the psychologists and team leader is considering how the context should look from an orthopedagogical perspective. For example, by having a clear daily schedule from the start. In addition, the psychologists and team

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leader indicated that it is important for them to be visible, available, and involved with support staff from the start. They also believe that attention should be paid in advance to finding and retaining the right support staff and how the organization deals with staff turnover. Finally, support staff need certain characteristics and competencies to be able to offer service users with complex behavior good support, according to psychologists and the team leader. Such as being responsive, authentic, and a team player.

	Service users	Support staff	Psychologists and team leader
1	Support staff are closely involved and reliable	Team safety	Working based on shared values and principles
2	Support staff know who I am and make arrangements that suit me	Support staff receive support and feel supported	Putting yourself in the service user's shoes
3	Support staff make me feel secure and take me seriously	Support staff feel that supporting professionals are closely involved and there is good communication	An organization-wide vision and strong commitment as a basis for a good start with the service user
4	I am welcome and feel welcome	All support staff have work and life experience	Support for support staff with the orthopedagogical approach
5	Give me time to settle in, get to know me and spend some time with me	Active preparation before service users arrive	Emotionally supportive in relation to the service user
6	Support staff are well trained	Support staff know in advance what is expected of them	Daily life is shaped directly by knowledge of service user and context
7		Ensure that the new home has a positive reputation through the professional use of safety measures	The organization sees, appreciates, and rewards support staff
8		Diversity in team composition	Experienced support staff as human beings

Conclusions and recommendations

AAll participant groups provided answers about the relationship between service users and support staff. Participants mentioned various characteristics of support staff that they consider important for creating trust and safety among service users. These include experience, self-confidence, and remaining calm in stressful situations. This is in line with findings from previous scientific research on people with mild intellectual disabilities or borderline intellectual functioning and challenging behavior. In addition, four factors were identified as important when setting up a new team of support staff:

1. Early introduction of service users and support staff
Allow service users and support staff to get to know each other before the transfer of service users to the new home. In practice, this is not common when it concerns service users with severe challenging behavior. Care organizations are advised to seek opportunities for early introductions. This can help service users become familiar with support staff, which in turn can help them handle stress, for example on a stressful moving day.

2. Safe team climate
Create a team climate in which support staff can trust each other, freely express their opinions, learn from mistakes, and work according to the same approach. The latter is in line with the importance of working according to the same principles, which has also been emphasized in previous research. To achieve a uniform working method, it is necessary for support staff to receive training and coaching to reflect on how they put the organization's vision and principles into practi

3. Social support for support staff
Offer staff support via the team leader, manager, and psychologist. Both instrumental and emotional support seem desirable. The importance of support for staff is also reflected in previous research literature, especially in relation to their well-being. However, not much research has been published on the role of psychologists in providing support. This study shows that it is important for psychologists to be involved from the beginning in supporting staff teams working with people with mild intellectual disabilities or borderline intellectual functioning and severe challenging behavior.

4. Positive image
Ensure both a realistic and positive image of the residential home. Rumors can stigmatize the home and lead to fear among (future) support staff, which can deter them from working at the home.

This summary is based on the article 'Setting up a new team of support staff for people with mild intellectual disability or borderline intellectual functioning and severe challenging behaviour: A concept mapping study' (Lokman, Van Oorsouw, Didden en Embregts, 2022)

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