Personal and working relationships in the lives of care experienced people: an exploratory research report

The Care Experienced Young People's Network

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Introduction

The Care Experienced Young People's Network (YPN) is a small group of care experienced (CEP) young people, campaigning for improved support for care leavers. The YPN have been supported by a care experienced project lead to develop and realise our own ideas since March 2020. The project is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, who gave us the freedom to shape the YPN in a way that reflects our own interests. Following a series of podcasts and a research project about the impact of COVID-19 on care leavers in 2020, this 2-year project comes to a close by bringing together our key ideas and passions in three research projects.

The motivation behind this research project was to understand how being care experienced affects both our professional and our personal relationships.

This short report presents the main findings and reflections from our research into relationships for CEP and concludes with our thoughts on what this means for professionals working with CEP and others around us. We have not named our interviewees or the organisations they work for in this report but would like to extend our thanks for their time, honesty, and interest in this work. This was a particularly challenging project to deliver so we really appreciate your contributions and kindness.

What did we do?

We began by reflecting on the questions that members of the YPN have been striving to answer in their own lives, with a particular focus on professional relationships as we felt this is often overlooked in favour of focusing on personal relationships. From these reflections we created a set of questions which we then put to five professionals who support CEP. We reached out to charities and projects that were also on the Esmée Fairbairn Leaving Care Funding Stream to speak to individuals who we felt could best offer insight into our questions in a series of half-hour interviews.

You can find the key questions we asked in the interviews at the end of this report in appendix A.

This research is exploratory, and our sample of interviewees does not reflect the experiences and opinions of everyone working in this space, nor the experience of all care experienced people. We present the key findings from this work along with our recommendations and hope this report sparks discussions and fresh thinking among professionals while providing some insight and comfort to other care experienced people, particularly those who are entering the working world.

What did we find out?

What words define a positive personal relationship?

reliability
equality
stability   responsive
supportive   listening
empathy
honesty
acceptance
transparency
communication
caring
receptive
trust
respect

What words define a positive professional relationship?

collaborative
communication
trust   reliability common-goal
understanding
clarity flexible   transparency
receptive   empathy

How does being care experienced challenge personal and professional relationships?

While being care experienced can sometimes lead to more support which is positive, care experienced people (CEP) often experience stigma, assumptions can be made, and we are sometimes blamed – whether people are aware they are doing so or not - for our experiences. CEP have an increased chance of experiencing mental health issues. Although it is only a small proportion of CEP overall, we are over-represented in criminal justice which leads to judgments about who we are. Stigma can mean friendships are blocked by the parents of other young people.

CEP can have difficulty explaining our experiences, which impacts our ability to form close relationships. This can be influenced by a lack of clarity about our own personal histories and by having to repeat those histories over and over to new professionals or other shifting support structures, which complicates our relationship with our own histories and those around us.

It is difficult to establish trust with others due to difficult childhood experiences. We have a heightened sensitivity to change or problems, which we learned as an early warning system in defense of further trauma and disruption. It can help us but also leads to slow trust-building. Trauma can mean we are wary of those who offer support due to past let-downs, and it is hard to overcome our insecurities so we might be less compromising or forgiving. Trauma and fear can manifest as anger, and a lack of safety net when making big decisions at a young age can leave us fearing big transitions later in life too.

Positive relationships haven't been modelled so we don't know what they should look like. This on top of loneliness when leaving care can lead to us being vulnerable and easily taken advantage of. Our attachment styles are often either very independent and resilient, with difficulty forming connections, or we're too reliant on connection and latch onto people for support.

We might also have complex relationships with authority figures and professional settings due to confusing or negative experiences with our local authority. It's difficult to know boundaries between professional and personal as this is blurred when you're in care i.e. there are adults playing a large role in your personal life, but in their professional capacity. Some of us find it hard to navigate the workplace with non-care-experienced adults when we try to start our careers or hold down jobs.

Some of these issues are well evidenced, like loneliness and isolation, but others are less commonly known, like the impact of being care experienced on forming appropriate and productive professional relationships. The level of awareness of these issues varies in CEP - some of us are highly aware and reflective and do a lot of work in therapy to tackle trauma, where others are not yet on this journey either due to lack of awareness or lack of resources, like access to therapy or appropriate peer support. This is likely to be influenced by how much additional support we've had from those around us to understand the impacts of trauma and deal with those challenges.

How does being care experienced benefit personal and professional relationships?

Despite often being treated with pity and misunderstanding, CEP often have a whole different skill set to other young people. The professionals we spoke to felt that:

- CEP can build powerful relationships with each other based on common ground and shared experiences.

- CEP have heightened sensitivity and empathy for other people and the world.

- CEP are often creative, resourceful, adaptable and resilient due to upheaval and change.

- CEP can be impressively comfortable and confident in professional settings as we've had more experience with professional systems.

- Once trust is established, CEP can be fiercely loyal and honest, and build profound rapport and connections.

- CEP often analyse relationships more and consider our own stories with more insight.

- CEP often have an appreciation of small things - we don't take anything for granted.

So, what's needed?

Those we spoke to felt that professionals who influence the lives of CEP need to do the following:

- Research into instances of young CEP not sustaining jobs for long periods - we need to understand why, and better support CEP into work. For example, young CEP need to know organisations have faith and are invested in them so professionals need to facilitate that.

- Offer advocacy for the basics that make the most difference e.g. bills, loans, and what to do if your housing is unbearable. It's hard fighting to get what you need when you know the system, even harder when you don't. This could include inquiries into poor living standards and support.

- Re-focus the culture of the system on providing support and protection. Replace the family network and act more like parents; creating opportunities as parents do. Professionals should think about what they would want for their own children.

- Invest in what engages and inspires young people so they have the opportunity to blossom in safety - there's plenty of talent and creativity in CEP.

- Introduce counselling earlier and address any stigma CEP associate with it.

- Focus more on relationships and building support networks that can last a lifetime, including mentorship.

- Focus contact on spending time together, not paperwork, and be flexible and accessible.

- Treat young CEP as equals and don't judge them based on inaccurate or incomplete reports.

- Challenge young people's behaviour in a caring way, understanding where unexpected behaviour comes from and the impact of trauma on young people.

- All young people need to be nudged and encouraged. Young CEP don't get the same level of support and investment in their future so professionals need to keep nudging, pushing and reaching out (rather than just expecting CEP to be proactive and persistent by themselves).

Systemic

Personal

We believe these recommendations will help shift the culture of the system that we've been exposed to and the nature of 1-2-1 relationships with professionals who can help. Programmes like Leap: confronting conflict can help everyone to navigate relationships in a trauma-informed way. We're also interested in what the public can do to help, so we had a closer look at mentoring.

Mentoring programmes

Mentoring schemes, such as the one successfully delivered by Pure Insight, can provide stability through a key figure who provides practical and emotional support. Connections made with key figures through schemes like this can have a significant impact on CEP, providing non-judgmental healthy relationships and enabling them to grow in self-confidence. It provides a place to turn when things feel lonely and worrying, helping to grow a sense of self in their lives and communities.

A well-considered matching process and rigorous training programme ensures that these relationships work for everyone involved, and peer support with other mentors can aid a sense of community and provide a buffer when supporting a young person through hard times is challenging. A study of the best methods of mentoring helped Pure Insight to create a solid model which we think can be replicated, and we'd love to see programmes like this standardised.

Many relationships that CEP have when we're in or leaving care are forced upon us, and this can create feelings of anger and annoyance. Having a consistent and flexible relationship with someone who is ordinary, i.e. who is not paid to spend time with us, can generate new feelings of self-worth and social acceptance, addressing some of the confusion about relationships mentioned earlier in this report - though trust may be hard-won to start with.

We feel local authorities and policymakers should invest more in well-researched and well-resourced mentoring schemes. We hope this is supported by the media and charities to recruit, inform and support members of the public who stand to gain a lot too, including new perspectives on the world around them and a renewed sense of purpose. Running a mentoring programme well is time-consuming but worthwhile, and should be sustainably funded to provide consistent support.

We will leave you with a quote from Pure Insight that resonates with the findings of this report.

"Safety is not found in eradicating risk; it is found in connections."

Appendix A - key questions asked in interviews on relationships

1. What are the markers of a positive personal relationship? / negative personal relationship?
2. What are the markers of a positive professional relationship? / negative professional relationship?
3. Do you think someone being care experienced has an impact on their personal and professional relationships, compared to those who aren't? What makes you say that?
4. From what you know, what are the key issues for CEP when forming and maintaining relationships? How aware do you think CEP are about those issues?
5. Have you seen any strengths in CEP around how they form and maintain relationships compared to people who aren't care experienced?
6. What do you think professionals who support CEP could be doing differently to support CEP to form positive personal and professional relationships?