

'beyond maturityblues'—peer educators take depression awareness to the bush

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Michelle Elding is the National Program Coordinator for Council on the Ageing. She has a strong background in health education with over 20 years experience in the development and implementation of health education projects both as a community health nurse in rural Victoria and in her current role at COTA.

Research has shown that older people have poorer mental health literacy than other age groups, and are therefore less likely to know about depression, less likely to consider it an illness or to seek treatment. The stigma often associated with a mental health illness, including depression is still prevalent in this age group.

With this in mind COTA (Council on the Ageing) a national peak body organisation that aims to protect and promote the well being of older people, and *beyondblue: the national depression initiative* combined their relevant expertise to develop and implement a peer education project, utilising volunteers aged 50 years and over to access community dwelling older people with information on depression.

The '*beyond maturityblues*', depression awareness project commenced nationally through the COTA's in each state and territory in 2007. Demand for sessions continued and in 2009 Stage 2 commenced and based on the outcomes of a scoping study undertaken by an external consultant at the request of COTA Seniors Voice, the '*beyond maturityblues*' project was extended to target more specific groups in the community – these include, men, veterans, people living with a chronic illness, people in rural and regional settings and volunteers/carers.

Toolkits outlining issues specific to each of these target groups were developed to support the training of peer educators. These toolkits are utilised by the peer educators to ensure the content of community sessions meet the specific needs of the group.

The project has also seen the implementation of a CaLD component, targeting the Italian, Greek, Vietnamese and Chinese communities, and in March 2010 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pilot project was commenced with COTA in South Australia working with and supporting Nunkuwarrin Yunti to develop and implement a culturally relevant and appropriate depression awareness project for the Aboriginal community in South Australia.

In October 2010 the '*beyond maturity blues*' project was extended for a further three years and is due to complete in September 2013. Information on anxiety has been included in peer educator training and is being provided to participants at community sessions as part of this project from February 2011.

The objectives of the project are to:

- increase awareness and understanding of depression in older people
- present strategies to minimise or reduce the risk of depression in older people
- provide information on supports and services available at both a local, state and national level.
- encourage older people to discuss issues related to their mental health with health professionals, families and friends
- destigmatise depression

The peer educator training which is undertaken over a 2 – 3 day period and the content discussed at community sessions which are usually between 45 minutes to one hour in duration, are based around the four key messages of the project

- depression is not a normal part of ageing
- depression is a health problem not a weakness
- depression is a treatable illness
- information and support are available.

Posters of key messages have also been developed for the Greek, Vietnamese, Italian and Chinese communities

In the period January 2007 – December 2010 2874 sessions have been delivered nationally to an estimated 59,888 participants.

Since September 2007 to December 2010, over 700 sessions have been delivered in rural communities across all states and territories. Unfortunately this data was not collected prior to this time, however sessions have been provided in rural communities since the program began and are included in the overall total of sessions presented. Over 300 peer educators have been trained with approximately 171 remaining active at the end of December 2010.

Most states and territories have a small number of peer educators located in rural and regional centres including, Mackay, Townsville, Tweed Heads, Geelong, Yorke Peninsula (SA) and others. Where there are no locally based peer educators, those from the metropolitan or nearest regional/rural centres have been organised to do the sessions, usually on a road trip which would include multiple sessions being presented over a short period of time to a variety of groups. These may include Rotary or service groups, support groups, carers and seniors groups.

On these occasions State Coordinators work with locally based groups/organisations including seniors groups, community health centres, Divisions of General Practice as a couple of examples to maximise the visit. On the other hand there are peer educators who have family in regional/rural centres who may travel there as part of a holiday, in which case providing they agree of course, we would then organise sessions to coincide with that visit. We are funded by *beyondblue* to present sessions in rural and regional centres and providing we have a peer educator willing to present we should be able to meet the demand.

Each peer education session is evaluated by the peer educator and where possible participants.

A brief summary of responses from participants (12,537 feedback forms collated) indicate the program is well received and the information is relevant to our target group

- 89.5% increased awareness of depression
- 72% stated the information was helpful
- 63% got ideas for change
- 69% would share with others what they had learnt (ripple effect)
- 74% would be supportive of others with depression
- 34.5% said they would complete the depression checklist and 34% would follow up the information with their doctor.

As previously mentioned a rural toolkit was developed for the information of peer educators and to ensure the discussion was relevant to rural communities. The Toolkit provides information on:

- specific issues relating to rural and regional communities
- information on risk and protective factors
- where to access information and support

- how communities can help get the message out there and help reduce the stigma
- specific *beyondblue* resources available to rural communities including information on e-health services
- possible sources of referral for a variety of issues.

The resources that are particularly relevant to rural communities are available free of charge from *beyondblue* and include fact sheets, DL cards, wallet cards, DVD's, books and contact lists to name a few. These resources are made available and promoted at sessions with participants also encouraged to access specific information relevant to their individual needs from the *beyondblue* info line 1300 22 4636 or from their website www.beyondblue.org.au

As well as providing information at community sessions, peer educators have taken on other roles such as supporting *beyondblue* and the COTA's at events, such as Mental Health Week/Anxiety and Depression Awareness month events, forums and conferences.

The Shed on Line is a new joint initiative of Movember, *beyondblue* and Australian Men's Shed Association. Peer educators were involved in providing feedback to *beyondblue* as part of the 'soft launch' of this project in November 2010. So as you can see their role is quite diverse.

COTA also publishes an article in each bi monthly issue of the OneCOTA National member's magazine. Each article has a different focus, with the June/July 2010 article focusing on issues faced by men in rural communities.

The *beyondblue* material is always very well received with lack of services and supports in rural and regional centres often raised by participants. Although on occasion a service may be available community members may not be aware of this. The sessions are interactive and provide the opportunity for participants to share their local knowledge of services and supports or what they have done in certain situations.

Discussions at sessions usually provide insight into people's experiences. Concern for the mental well-being of younger family members such as adult children or grandchildren, is often raised and this was particularly evident during the global financial crisis and following the natural disasters many communities have faced over recent times. People are not encouraged to disclose their own experiences with depression however it is not unusual for participants to willingly do so. Sometimes for the first time others in the group become aware of the history of that person. This usually has a positive impact on the discussion, the person disclosing and the group.

This is a comment from a rural participant following a session in South Australia.

Informing others in the group of things I have been aware of and experienced myself is helpful. Raised awareness is taking the 'boogey man' or fear out of the subject and helping it (depression) to become acceptable and better understood. Thank you for the session.

It is also important that the peer educators gain satisfaction from their involvement within the project and are supported in their role as sometimes they are confronted by situations they were unaware of such as one recently conducted in Rural South Australia where in a group of twenty eight women, five had lost their husband to suicide. The feedback from this peer educator who facilitated this session in rural SA highlights the importance of projects such as this. It also highlights the level of hardship and difficulties our rural and regional Australians are experiencing, something I am sure you are all aware of.

Peer educators have training around dealing with grief and loss in others and the importance of looking after themselves. They are supported by State Coordinators and through peer educator network meetings where issues and concerns may be discussed. As this feedback indicates peer educators gain much satisfaction from being part of this project.

One lady grabbed my hand as I gave out the handouts. As she looked at me she said – 'my dear I have suffered a lot from depression and people just do not understand – thank you. Participant Shellharbour NSW

This makes my involvement with the project worthwhile. Peer educator NSW

If you would like to know more about the peer education project please feel free to contact Debra Petrys at COTA in South Australia on 08 82320422 or dpetrys@seniorsvoice.org.au or to book a session please contact the COTA in your State or Territory.

Thank you