

Well Ways for carers in rural Western Australia

Pam Gardner¹, Samantha Harris²

¹Western Australian Association of Mental Health, ²Mental Illness Fellowship of WA

Pam Gardner is on the Board of the Western Australian Association of Mental Health (WAAMH) and the Bay of Isles Community Outreach (BOICO), an NGO offering psycho-social and personalised support to citizens with a lived experience of mental illness, their carers and families. Partnering with MIFWA has added significantly to the service provision of BOICO and, after caring for family members with mental illness for over 30 years, Pam found the program life changing.

Samantha Harris has been working in the community health sector for 15 years with 11 of those years providing support services for family carers and she has worked with the Mental Illness Fellowship of WA (MIFWA) since 2009. Samantha has an Advanced Diploma of Counselling and Family Therapy and is a strong advocate for families affected by mental illness. She has a personal experience as a carer of a family member with a mental illness.

This session provides information for the health sector about the Well Ways program, and an understanding that education is the most important assistance we can provide to carers and their families.

Carers do not consider themselves unwell, but being overwhelmed, traumatised and stressed beyond endurance can bring health and wellbeing problems that seem insurmountable. Comments such as 'Make them pull their socks up' and 'just walk away' add to carers' sense of helplessness and social withdrawal. The Well Ways program developed by the Mental Illness Fellowship of Victoria has become a valuable tool in empowering carers and families to contribute meaningfully and informatively to their labour of love in supporting a family member on their often difficult path to recovery.

The Well Ways education programs have a strong evidence base and deliver current perspectives and information on mental illness. Carers comments, for example, 'feeling positive about my role' and 'having my life back' indicate that these programs increase the capacity of families and improve carers' sense of control over their situation and improve the quality of their lives.

Currently MIFWA's Well Ways suite of programs include:

- Building a Future—utilises carer experiences to contribute to better family outcomes, complement clinical services and provide information about mental illness and the legal system to improve their capacity to access information and services
- Duo—aims to increase the capacity of carers and their families to care effectively for themselves and the person with a mental illness and substance use issues by providing current information on behaviours associated with substance abuse, harm reduction, managing sometimes violent situations and using other community professionals
- Snapshot—a short program that provides insight into the development of mental illness and dealing with challenges and learning from the lived experience of someone with a mental illness.

Through strong partnerships in rural areas this program has been implemented in a regional community. This approach harnesses the untapped capacity of carers to support each other and develop a sustainable program and support network by training local people to facilitate programs within their own region utilising local experiences and understandings.