

Introducing mindfulness to stressed family carers: Using collaborative methodology to identify chosen indicators of positive change

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Background and Objectives

Family carers of adults with an intellectual disability and challenging behaviour experience long term exposure to unpredictability and stress, placing them at risk of a variety of negative outcomes including poorer mental health, physical health and reduced socio – economic resources. Research on training and support needs for parents of adult children and the impact of training is underdeveloped.

A collaborative action research approach with participatory methods was used to explore if mindfulness practice, in the context of a five week stress management course may help family carers cope with the significant emotional demands of caring.

Methods

Parents/family carers with little to no experience of mindfulness were recruited through relationships with NHS and third-sector organisations. Semi structured qualitative interviews were carried out with family carers (n=12) and facilitators (n=2) prior to the course and critical reflective processes (focus groups) were facilitated during and thereafter. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed by thematic analysis.

The course elicited a positive response from both family carers (completed n=10) and facilitators. Indicators of change, defined by those involved, included: noticing their internal experiences, letting go of difficult thoughts, changing familiar behaviour response patterns and investing in their own wellbeing. At 3 month post course follow up, family carers reported ongoing benefits.

Discussion

Family carers were able to embed mindfulness principles and value clarification into their everyday lives. They described the acquisition and application of skills in observing and describing their internal experience and acting with awareness and without judgement. These skills were helpful in challenging situations specific to their caring role and also in their everyday lives.

Conclusion

The participatory methodology supported reflexive processes that allowed family carers and facilitators to critically reflect on their direct experiences of the course and factors that contributed to its success. This generated knowledge about recruitment, rapport, facilitation style, the importance of being in a group and learning from and supporting one another. This knowledge will inform the utility of the course with future family carer groups.