

Kia ora and good day to you all.

My name is Allan and I am presenting to you today regarding some early findings from my research into psychological first aid models that used to support social workers in frontline mental health services.

In keeping with my theme and the cultural tikanga of Aotearoa's indigenous people, The Maori, I will begin with a brief karakia – a prayer in Te Reo Maori – or the Maori language.

E te Atua, manaakitanga matou, e tenei wa, homai kia matou, te kaha, te ora, me te maramatanga, amine!

While my research initially focused on assistance given to those who have experienced trauma in the course of their work, a supplementary question soon evolved around what social workers see as important, perhaps even pivotal, to maintaining wellness throughout their work/social practice journey.

It became obvious from the stories our participants shared, that maintaining ongoing wellness was equally important and supportive to their wellbeing, as having good psychological first aid practices in place for those times when traumatic incidents occurred.

So, to the research process itself, this is a qualitative practitioner research project, utilising semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to explore how a small but diverse group of mental health social workers based in Auckland New Zealand, perceive the support they have received from their employer organisations in terms of:

1 providing appropriate psychological first aid following critical incidents, and 2 supporting the ongoing wellness of staff in high stress work roles - and it is into 2<sup>nd</sup> this area that we are delving today

Utilising a framework for interviewing taken from Davidson's (2003) structured analysis technique, 'which focuses on hearing the narratives of the participants before asking for any judgement about (those) experiences' (Bold-Wilson, 2017, p. 41)

Listening to their stories first, then exploring how they feel about it, employing methods of interaction intended to elicit honest, well-informed feedback based upon lived experience and wide theoretical and organisational knowledge among participants; of note there were 10 interviewees with periods of time working in the field ranging from 7 years to over 30 years. So this is a very experienced group of participants. Once we had transcribed the interviews a thematic analysis process was used to identify, analyse and report patterns emerging from within the data.

In terms of our interview questions, we first asked questions regarding participation in critical events i.e. events where risk to self or others was present, and the aftermath of such events,

for example: What happened? With whom present? In what order and timeframe? This included the psychological first aid processes they were offered or engaged in.

Then we explored how it was, what they felt about these experiences i.e. what they perceived as good effects and what they perceived as negative effects of these events, most importantly focusing here on the support that was given to them in dealing with the emotional responses experienced.

Then in phase 3, and it is from this section that I'm sharing with you today, we discussed what they believe should be in place to support the psychological wellbeing of themselves and peers, not just

in dealing with critical incidents, but with ongoing support with the work/mahi we are engaged in each day.

In Aotearoa New Zealand we have a wide cultural and ethnic mix within our population, including our biggest city, Auckland, having the largest Polynesian population of any city in the world.

Among the participant's responses were a number of indicators that alongside understanding your role, strong team bonds, healthy relationships, both in the work life and private spheres, and good supervision, being able to connect to, and anchor yourself to, your own cultural roots and ways of being is important. For defining culture here, I use the Meriam Webster online definition as "customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group" but also incorporating "characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time."

For Maori and Pasifika this clearly included knowing your whakapapa, or heritage and genealogy, and your place within a larger connected community that gives meaning to your being. This is part of what is required to move forward safely and maintain wellbeing. Support of colleagues and whanau/family or the aiga/village, or cultural community one belongs to came forth strongly. Partaking in activities related to your culture, be they church, community or politically related, were felt to be important

A Pasifika participant stated:

"We're part of a culture that's bigger than us as individuals. It's what birthed you and raised you and you need to give back. But it also keeps you safe. Keeps you grounded"

Use of Tikanga/correct protocols around hui/meetings i.e. starting with karakia, engaging a process of mutual introduction known as whakawhanaungatanga, hearing Te Reo used and respected are important for Maori, as is for some, ritualistic cleansing with water or prayer at the end of the day's work. These things anchor a person within the context of who they are beyond the social work role and with definite benefit for the individual.

A Maori participant shared:

"These things help us to remember our place as tangata whenua (people of the land), they embolden us and make us stronger in the mahi (work)"

For others the connections to cultural anchors are less around an ethnic or traditionally cultural dynamic. Understanding heritage does come through for this group, but the anchor has moved forward into the now in a different form.

Concepts of spirituality related to a particular religious' heritage for example are described by some. While not necessarily practicing a religion of ancestors and parents, some found engaging in prayer, or visiting a church during a quiet time, when no service was taking place and they could simply relax and bask in the sense of a peaceful location or presence, was beneficial to maintaining a sense of wellbeing.

I.e. a Pakeha (New Zealander of European heritage) proudly identified having Irish forebears and had sought out knowledge of this, but while acknowledging the influence his Irish heritage had upon his upbringing through passed down traits and behaviours, he does not consider his family ethnic connection a major part of his being in the world today, connecting more to the Catholic childhood he experienced in Aotearoa New Zealand. To quote him:

“I sometimes just go and sit in a church when its quiet, just for the peace of it ... and find myself praying, even though I don't usually pray at all. Its calming”

Taking the concept of cultural anchors further into this arena, discussion arose of maintaining connection to the things that one experienced in the cultural milieu one was exposed to in childhood, assisted with staying well. Examples of going back to one's old or youthful connections were given, including one participant who would return every few months to the township where he had grown up and where his family had lived since the 1850's, which is old for Aotearoa New Zealand's non-indigenous population, remembering the colonisation of this land only began in 1840.

To quote this participant:

“Every few months I go back to Otahuhu, usually on a Friday afternoon when the main street is busy as, there's always heaps of people about. Its changed heaps from when I was a kid in terms of the shops and stuff, but the crowded streets and multi-cultural mix of people, and the churches and actual building themselves, they take me back somewhere, make me feel grounded. I always feel good after I do that, like I know where I come from. It's hard to explain but it does something for me”

Another spoke of connecting to music from childhood as a daily means of transitioning out of the work space and being able to let the concerns of the day go.

“I go home and put on headphones, because no one else in my house can stand it, and I listen to pre 1980 Elton John songs. It helps me let go . . . I think it because I heard these songs on the radio as a kid and it takes me back to a time before I knew just how horrible the world can be.”

Even the concept of having a beer, after work, was something that an English participant referred to:

“It's what we do in England, have a pint after work, talk through anything that's happened during the day with your colleagues. Its good . . . best way to end a day and close it out”

Each of the participants had their own sense of what cultural activities or events might look like, and not all raised the concept initially, but when it became part of the conversation all saw connection to these aspects of one's life as part anchoring, stabilizing the self in the mahi, the work we are engaged in.

They also found that having awareness of one's own culture and norms, and connections to those things we are describing as anchors, increased awareness of how their own cultural orientation affects their interaction with others, and strengthen willingness to seek understanding of other's cultures, translating into better outcomes when working across cultures, and into a greater sense of wellbeing for the social worker.

“You've got to know where you come from, and be comfortable with that, before you can give proper respect to other cultures”

“It makes me more willing, or able, to work across cultures, which we do. . . builds confidence in my understanding and skill level. Which helps make me feel better, in terms of my wellbeing”

So, I acknowledge this has been short presentation of findings, but we are time limited and you will appreciate that the scope of my research include much more than this portion of findings, but they are very relevant and it would seem universally accepted as key components of maintaining ongoing wellness for social worker engaged often very difficult and emotionally straining roles.

So, that concludes my presentation today. I thank you for listening and am happy to take questions .

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