

It's Not Always a Crisis: Social Support Provided by Police Officers to Persons with a Mental Illness

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Presentation Aim

- To highlight the implications for service delivery of an exploratory study of the ways in which police activities are forms of social support for persons with a mental illness.

Overview

- Background and Objectives
- Method
- Findings
- Implications





Background

- *Stress process framework* assumes that social support is a protective factor that helps to promote and maintain wellbeing
- *Community resource base approach* to conceptualizing supports for persons with a mental illness puts them at the center of a system of care and support

Background

- *Community policing principles* (e.g., partnerships/community collaboration, customer/client focus, problem-solving) dovetail with a community resource base approach to supporting persons with a mental illness
- Literature on contacts between persons with a mental illness and police officers has focused on officers' knowledge and beliefs about, attitudes towards, and decision-making regarding persons with a mental illness rather than what they do and how it is supportive

Objectives

- To delineate the ways in which officers' actions constitute forms of social support
- To aid in identifying the mechanisms by which police/mental health initiatives are helpful
- Identify how the work of officers facilitates enhancing other supportive relationships

Method

- Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 17 police officers of varied ranks from 2 Ontario police agencies.
- Based on Cutrona and Russell's (1990) supportive behaviours framework, preliminary codes were created reflecting the five forms of support: tangible aid, informational support, social integration, emotional support, and esteem support.

Supportive Behaviours Framework

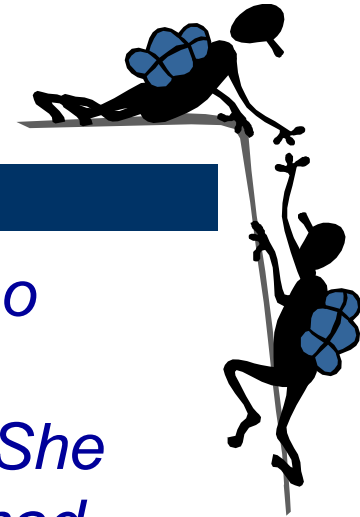
Type of Support	Definition
Tangible Aid	Help someone get somewhere, locate a relative or accomplish a task
Informational Support	Provide someone with information about something or someone
Social Integration	Assist someone to interact with family, friends or other community members, to increase community involvement
Emotional Support	Provide someone with comfort and security during times of stress
Esteem Support	Assist someone to feel good about himself or herself

Findings

- Police officers provide all five forms of social support (tangible aid, informational, social integration, emotional, and esteem) to persons with a mental illness or who appear to have a mental health issue and often provide more than one form of support to a given individual

Tangible Aid

- *“And, we received a call from a lady who appeared to be suffering from a mental illness, who needed a place of shelter. She had called at 3am in the morning, and had been wandering around in the streets, and calling from different payphones, 911, asking for a shelter. So, we got a call a few hours later to take, arrange for a shelter.” (PO103)*



Tangible Aid

- *“Turns out the son’s having a bit of an episode that day and didn’t know what, they didn’t know how to handle him so, they decided to take him to the ground because he was trying to hurt everybody with this knife. And then when we were there, he says “as soon as you guys let me go, I’m grabbing anything I can and I’m going to kill myself”. Well, let’s go up to the hospital then.” (PO110)*

Informational Support

- *“When we interact with a person with a mental illness, I guess, we provide them with information that they can seek their own type of counselling, or the numbers they can call or places that they can go, if there’s nothing else that we can do for them at that time. If we’re not apprehending them and bringing them to the hospital, then we can provide an alternative for them. ... I’ve provided numbers before to different agencies or hospitals.” (PO101)*



Informational Support

- *“What we did was we just gave her information about some of the, like the outreach programs for new immigrants and coping, for coping and family situations and support for the family. So, we did, we provided that and she was, she was Chinese so we gave her, you know, some, specific to her language, cause she was, another issue she had was she was very concerned about not being able to speak English well enough so she was apprehensive to call because she felt uncomfortable with her own language skills.” (PO108)*



Social Integration

- *“And, the problem is that, there isn’t enough for us to take them up because you know that they will not be assessed to be placed into the (psychiatric institution) and that’s where trying to get a hold of a relative or if they have a worker or something like that or somebody that they, I guess, somebody they ask us to get a hold of, we’d try to get a hold of them that way and try and resolve the situation so at least we know that they’re looked after that way.” (PO111)*



Social Integration

- *“I have provided them with, this is sort of an informational one, but with community supports that do that kind of thing, or volunteer programs, providing them information about volunteer programs too... Cause sometimes they will be having a lot of spare time and they kind of, gets on, gets on their nerves having so much spare time, they want to be occupied, they want to have interactions. So, sometimes we give them that type of information to enable them to do that.” (PO106)*

Emotional Support

- *“Let’s say you’re dealing with a person and they have fears of the doctor at the hospital, you might want to talk to them in the sense that “you know, this is a place where people come to get help when they’re not feeling well or they’re hurt and the doctor and nurse, you know, they’re here to help you, they’re not here to hurt you, they’re here to make sure that you’re okay”. Like, address in that sense, their comfort level.” (PO113)*



Emotional Support

- *“Obviously, you know, if you have CIT guys, we deal with it a lot differently than a front line officer because we realize you just let them talk and you can help them best by just listening.” (PO107)*

Esteem Support

- *“I was going to say too, a lot of the times too when we’re downtown, and (...) there’re mentally ill people downtown, walking around. Of course, they all know us and they want to say hi. Everybody generally says hi to them and you know, asks them how they’re doing and how’s your family doing. They seem to really perk up from that because it looks like somebody’s interested and of course, you know, Officer S.’s, you know, Officer S. said hi to me and stuff, so.” (PO114)*



Esteem Support

- *“Once you establish a dialogue with someone, then that can lead to different things. As I said earlier, I mean if someone suffering from depression or suicide attempts um, and permits the officer to engage in a dialogue, there’ll be a natural progression of events, to try to give a, particularly a young person, self-esteem to get over that hurdle of, of suicidal tendencies. I think we’re all aware that we realize that’s why those thoughts might be there, because of lack of self-esteem issues.” (PO115)*

Multiple Forms of Support

- *“We try to be supportive. You know, we point out the good things, we try to help them make plans as to how they can feel safe. Again, as I’ve already mentioned over and over, we give them information and we try to build them up, give them confidence, you know, maybe point them back on the right direction.” (PO104)*

Implications for Mental Health and Police Practitioners

- Regardless of whether or not they are involved in formalized police/mental health liaison efforts, police officers have a pivotal role in supporting persons with a mental illness
- To effectively provide these supportive behaviours to persons with a mental illness, police officers need to be aware of support services available in the community

Implications for Mental Health and Police Practitioners

- Need to evaluate the effectiveness of police training to ensure it meets the needs of police officers in regard to their support role
- Not all interactions between police officers and persons with a mental illness are crisis situations

Implications for Mental Health and Police Practitioners

- Certain police actions often not labelled as “supportive” are indeed forms of social support. For example, “tangible aid” includes transporting or driving someone to a place. Officers do this regularly, including transporting individuals to a hospital, yet this action has not been understood within a social support framework.
- Social support provided by police officers to persons with a mental illness can be viewed as a component of community policing

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- mclaughlininformation@camh.net
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