Pilot Telephone Support Groups

Who are we?
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Background
Stigma and fear of unwanted disclosure can be a barrier to access of face-to-face HIV support groups. Individuals with HIV sometimes report that they can only identify with others from a similar background; but organising such specific face-to-face group support is often not feasible in any one health board.

We hope that providing telephone support groups using teleconferencing will remove these barriers and enable individuals in similar situations (albeit geographically further apart) to access support. The telephone will allow protection of anonymity, while allowing a reinforcement of a positive sharing experience through dialogue within a safe environment facilitated by professionals.

Fife Health and Wellbeing Alliance (FHWA) has recently provided funding to allow us to pilot telephone based group support for individuals with HIV using NHS Fife teleconferencing phones. These groups will run between September 2014 and February 2015.

Who are the pilot telephone support groups for?
We propose to run the following groups in sequential order:

1. Women with HIV.
2. Individuals living with HIV as a long-term condition (with ongoing HIV-associated health problems and issues).
3. Family members, carers and friends of people affected by HIV who may be without support.
4. Men who have sex with men (MSM) who do not identify as being gay, bisexual or transgender who have HIV.

Dependant on having sufficient funding remaining we also hope to run a group for:

5. People living with HIV who have not disclosed their condition to their employer.

Any individual living with HIV in Scotland who identifies as a member of one of the above groups can be referred to us. However, individuals with active suicidal ideation or acute psychiatric symptoms should be referred to the appropriate mental health service in their own health board.

Timing of groups
We hope to be able to commence group (1) in September and group (2) in October. We hope to start group (3) in November and group (4) in January. If we are able to run group (5) it would begin in February. However, the exact timing of each group will be dependent on numbers referred to us so please bear with us!
What will the pilot telephone support groups involve?
Each group will be six weekly 1.5 hour sessions and there will be two monthly follow-up sessions. Because of the temporary nature of the funding these are ‘closed’ rather than ‘open’ groups. We plan for each group to be for a minimum of four and maximum of seven members. Prior to commencing each group we plan to assess each individuals’ needs and preferences for topics of discussion and shape the content of each group accordingly. For individuals out with Fife, we propose to do this by telephone. As we aim to draw from participants their own positive coping, we will encourage topics of discussion around strategies, activities, experiences and information sharing that have helped: reduce isolation, increase confidence, manage issues of disclosure, improve adherence to treatment and health advice.

Pre-group discussion with individuals will also cover issues of confidentiality and its’ management in the group. We will check whether individuals are happy to receive material (e.g. a list of dates and times of group sessions) by normal post, signed for post, or if they would prefer no material is sent to their address. We will also explain how teleconferencing works, for example, how each participant will be individually phoned into the group by us at each session. Our facilitation of the groups will aim to ensure containment from distressing emotional material and to encourage the sharing of positive coping strategies and experiences of living well with HIV. Should an individual wish to make contact with another group member they can contact one of us in between sessions and request that their contact information is passed on.

In line with the aims of the grant awarded by FHWA we need to seek qualitative feedback from all individuals referred to us (whether they take up the offer of a place in a group, choose not to, or drop out). This is to learn about the wellbeing needs and preferences of people affected by HIV and the impact of participating in a telephone group. This will involve a brief telephone interview with Ellen Townend, C.Psychol, Health Psychologists who will take anonymised notes and treat the information provided with strict confidentiality. However, it is not necessary for an individual to consent to providing this feedback to be referred to us.

How do I refer someone to the group?
Please feel free to contact us to find out more and to discuss any referral(s) you may have in mind. If you perceive there are issues of risk for anyone you are considering referring we would like to discuss how the person can be best supported through the group and in between sessions.

Please use our Pilot Telephone Support Group referral form to make a referral once you have decided it would be helpful and appropriate to each individual in question.

Because of our limited funding we have to offer places on a first come first served basis.

Keeping in touch with us and individuals
We are happy for individuals to continue to see any professionals they are in contact with during the group and will leave it up to referrers to make their own judgement on this. We would be happy to discuss any individuals’ progress as deemed appropriate by yourself as their locally based professional while they are attending a group. If we perceive any issue of risk of harm, we would like to be able to contact you as the referrer to discuss this as well as contacting the appropriate professionals. We plan to notify referrers by post with a brief summary of individuals’ participation when they complete a group.

Waverley Care is Scotland’s leading charity providing care and support to people living with HIV or Hepatitis C. Waverley Care Scottish Charity No: SC036500. Terrence Higgins Trust is a registered charity in Scotland (SCO39986). & in England & Wales (reg no. 288527). Ref 7032302.