

# PRACTICES TO IMPROVE SUPPORTED DECISION-MAKING IN MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES



Supported decision-making (SDM) can be enabled by promoting legal or rights-based mechanisms, the development of interpersonal skills, empowering people experiencing mental health challenges and facilitating management and leadership in the implementation of SDM. Mental health services are encouraged to incorporate these elements in their policies and practices:



## Empowering consumers

Mental health practitioners who encourage and support people to make decisions and take responsibility for the consequences facilitate personal recovery. This encouragement communicates dignity and hope to people experiencing mental health challenges and their families and other supporters. Support with decisions can be offered through resources such as these Fact Sheets, the Healthtalk online resources, decision-making learning materials and training programs, as well as through peer support and other ways of sharing experiences.

## Legal or rights-based mechanisms

People who experience mental health challenges express the hope that formal supported decision-making mechanisms will lead to their greater involvement in treatment and life decisions. Family and other supporters also hope that legal mechanisms will improve the quality of their involvement. This requires that information about advance statements, nominated persons, second psychiatric opinions and advocacy are promoted in and by services. While there is evidence that more people know about and utilise advance statements and nominated persons, mental health practitioners may not regularly follow requests in advance statements. [1, 2] Further education and support for practitioners is needed to ensure that legal mechanisms are available and used.

## Interpersonal skills

People who experience mental health challenges and their families and other supporters describe their relationships with mental health practitioners, General Practitioners and other health professionals as important to them. Interpersonal relationships between practitioners and people experiencing mental health challenges that encourage effective supported decision-making are linked to continuity of care, a personalised approach, focus on sensitive use of language and provision of relevant information, as well as a person-focused approach. People's experiences are discussed here: <http://research.healthtalkaustralia.org/supported-decision-making/overview> and <http://research.healthtalkaustralia.org/carers/how-to-increase-carers-participation-in-supporting-treatment-decisions>

## Management and leadership

In recognition of the improved outcomes that arise from supported decision-making, psychiatrists and senior clinicians are encouraged to champion and demonstrate supported decision-making to ensure that all team members can learn how to enable this. Families and other supporters' involvement in supported decision-making includes and extends beyond inviting families and other supporters to meetings, to embedding their expertise in service delivery by engaging with them as key sources of support for people's decision-making. Mental health services should recognise and support 'pockets of excellence' that already occur in services. Staff supervision, support and training are needed to increase knowledge of the different types of decision-making and to ensure that preferences in advance statements are honoured where possible. Resources need to be allocated to support these activities.

## Some key themes in improving practice

### **Personalised, continuous care**

Research indicates that continuity of care is important for the development of trust in therapeutic relationships which in turn is needed to enable supported decision-making. [1] Many people want assurance that they are not just a “number” and for health professionals to ask them what they want instead of focusing only on their symptoms. Family members and other supporters also said they felt they are in a position to support treatment decisions when relationships with practitioners are built over time. Mental health and other health practitioners who listen and empathise contribute to the development of the therapeutic relationship.

### **Language and information**

People want mental health and other health practitioners to be careful with the language they use when treating and caring for people with experience of a mental health problem. Participants would like to see such practitioners give more attention to discussing diagnoses with sensitivity and taking the time to explain and share information. Families and other supporters can support decision-making if service providers include them in the information sharing process. Their perspectives can be found on the online resource:

<http://research.healthtalkaustralia.org/carers/how-to-increase-carers-participation-in-supporting-treatment-decisions>

### **A person-centred approach**

Mental health and other health practitioners who treat people experiencing mental health challenges as individuals with their own lives, and who take the time to understand their experience, are preferred. Participants commented for example that they prefer such practitioners to “look at the social side” of people’s lives and their “wellbeing and things like that” and want them to take a more holistic approach to treatment and care. These perspectives can be found on the online resource: <http://research.healthtalkaustralia.org/supported-decision-making/support-in-treatment-decisions>

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## References

1. Nicaise P, Lorant V and Dubois V, (2013) Psychiatric advance directives as a complex and multistage intervention: a realist systematic review *Health and Social Care in the Community* 21(1): 1-14.
2. Sellars M, Fullam R, O’Leary C, et al, (2017) Australian psychiatrists’ support for psychiatric advance directives: responses to a hypothetical vignette *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* 24(1): 1-13.

This Fact Sheet is part of a series of resources designed to improve supported decision-making practices for people experiencing mental health challenges and to assist families and other supporters' participation in supported decision-making. These resources can be used individually, as an aid to policy development, and as a training tool.

See also:

- What Is Supported Decision-Making? Fact Sheet
- Supported Decision-Making Legal Mechanisms Fact Sheet
- Resources To Assist With Supported Decision-Making Fact Sheet
- Guidelines For Supported Decision-Making For Mental Health Services
- Introduction To Supported Decision-Making For People Experiencing Mental Health Challenges And Their Families And Other Supporters
- Report – Options For Supported Decision-Making To Enhance The Recovery Of People Experiencing Severe Mental Health Problems
- Online Resources – <http://research.healthtalkaustralia.org/supported-decision-making/support-in-treatment-decisions>

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