

In October 2018, staff and volunteers across the BAB programme came together to learn how to make their work more inclusive and accessible for older people with sight loss, hearing loss, dual sensory loss or experience of substance misuse.

Sense, Bristol Drugs Project and the Centre for Deaf and Hard of Hearing shared their expertise and encouraged attendees to reflect on their practice. This document shares the key learning from this event.

1

Do not assume the older people engaging with your project will have similar life experiences or communication needs

- If you can, **ask people in advance if they have any access requirements**, but be aware that many will be reluctant to tell you or may not think of themselves in this way. Even when you are talking to someone one-to-one, they still might not mention that they cannot understand you.
- Instead of singling them out in a group setting or asking them to admit in front of others that they need you to communicate differently, **try asking them one-to-one by phrasing the question in a more practical way** for example “is this font size ok for you?”, “can you hear me ok?” or “do you need to move closer?”.
- Similarly, be aware of the **subconscious stereotypes** you have. For example you may have an image in your mind of what someone with experience of substance misuse looks or acts like, and therefore assume that none of your participants have this life experience (e.g. because they are Muslim). By making this assumption, you may inadvertently make them feel judged or not welcome.
- As a group facilitator, it is your responsibility to create an atmosphere that is inclusive and non-judgemental. It is important to give the message that **life experiences are not something to be ashamed of**.

2

Have a person-centred attitude and a willingness to try

- Treat them with respect as an individual by **communicating directly with them rather than speaking to their support worker, interpreter or translator**. An individual will not expect you to be fluent in non-verbal forms of communication, but will expect you to listen to their communication preferences and try your best.
- However if you are struggling to communicate with someone then it is also ok to work with their wider circle of support. **Don't be afraid to ask questions** about

the best ways to communicate with someone. Similarly, many organisations have information & advice phone lines which can be a useful sounding board if you have a quick question about accessibility.

- **Have patience** as it can often take much longer to communicate with someone with hearing loss or sight loss or even longer if someone is experiencing deafblindness. This time consuming nature of communication is what frequently contributes towards feelings of loneliness and isolation.

3

Remember that levels of confidence will vary between individuals and according to the situation

- Someone may be very confident communicating in a one-to-one setting but then **lose confidence** when with a group of people they have never met before.
- They may **fear being judged** by the group or **having nothing in common** with anyone else there due to different life experiences, for example dreading other people asking about their past.
- Similarly, they may **fear not being able to keep up** with the group conversation or understand what is going on. Individuals may need additional support and encouragement to overcome these anxieties and branch out of their comfort zone. They may feel 'trapped' in a certain population they are familiar with (for example those also recovering from substance misuse), and yet at the same time feel anxious about meeting new people who do not share this background.
- Sight loss, hearing loss, dual sensory loss and experience of substance misuse all have an **emotional impact**. For example anxiety can be intensified by feelings of jealousy, disgust, frustration, shame or self-hatred, which will all affect an individual's confidence and willingness to engage with your project. For people with deteriorating sight and hearing, there is likely to be feelings of loss.
- Feelings of anxiety or **reluctance to engage may be affected by individuals having a previous negative experience** with services or community groups, for example if they tried to access services when the stigma around substance misuse was at its peak a few decades ago.

4

Seven practical communication tips to get you started

- If a person is hard of hearing, **make sure you have their attention before starting to speak and maintain eye contact throughout the conversation**. Good ways to attract their attention include visual clues or touching them on the upper arm between the shoulder and the elbow. Keep your mouth visible, for example do not speak with your hand over your mouth or an object in your mouth such as a pen or a cigarette.

- **Think about your positioning in the room.** Try not to stand in front of a window as it may create a shadow on your face which makes it difficult to lip read. Similarly, distractions behind you such as a TV screen or busy doorway may make it harder for the individual to concentrate on what you are saying.
- **Be aware of background noise.** This includes noise from other sources (e.g. other people in the building), but also the echoes which can be created when multiple people in a room speak at once. Speak one at a time, listening without interrupting.
- If someone does not hear you, **always repeat it or find another way to communicate** with them until they understand what you said. Never say “it doesn’t matter” as this excludes them from the situation. The best practice is to repeat what you said a second time, then if necessary repeat it a third time but change the wording, then if necessary write it down (for example on your phone). Keep trying different methods until you convey what you said.
- Slow **the pace of the conversation** and build in **regular communication breaks**, as it can be tiring to keep up with what is being said and these breaks will benefit everyone. Similarly, keep activity sessions short rather than lasting the whole day.
- People who are deaf or hard of hearing may require **communication support so ensure you know how to book** interpreters, lip speakers, note takers etc.
- Proactively offer a **variety of communication options** in addition to the usual email and telephone details. For example some people may find it easier to use instant messaging (either via webchat or on social media) or video conferencing (such as Whatsapp video call, Skype or Glide). Similarly, when giving instructions to a group, it is best not to rely on verbal communication alone; try having short written instructions, showing them a demonstration or providing other visual cues. This will benefit everyone by catering to different learning styles.

5

Ensure individuals are aware that there is support available to them

- Some people who lose their sight or hearing gradually over a period of time **might see it as simply part of the natural ageing process and therefore do not seek support**, however there are many forms of support for people to access which can improve their quality of life.
- There are **a variety of apps** which can help those with hearing loss or sight loss, for example to alert them that someone is at the door, that the phone is ringing or to assist them when making phone calls. One example is the Next Generation Text Service, which is a type talk app. Individuals may have a smart phone but be unaware that these apps exist.



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