

Mental Health Awareness Training for Prison Officers:
Evaluation of a Training Video

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Introduction

A mental health awareness training package for prison officers was developed by the Institute of Health and Community Studies at Bournemouth University during 2003-2004 for HM Prison Service and the NHSU. In addition, a training video was commissioned by the NHSU to support the training package. An evaluation of this video material was undertaken during October 2004.

The video comprises four short films lasting around three minutes each, which address schizophrenia, the reception process in prison, self-harm and personality disorder. Actors were used in all the films to play the parts of officers and inmates.

Aim and Objectives of the Evaluation

Aim

- To evaluate the use of a bespoke training video in conjunction with the Mental Health Awareness Training for Prison Officers package developed by IHCS at Bournemouth University.

Objectives

- To assess the efficacy of the training video to enhance learning when used as part of the mental health awareness training for prison officers;
- To elicit the views of course participants and trainers as to the appropriate method of using the video material;
- To elicit the views of prison officers as to the accuracy of the content.

Methodology and Data Collection

This qualitative evaluation made use of a within method triangulation approach to data collection (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002), whereby data from three sources was collected using different methods: questionnaires, a focus group and unstructured interview. This approach was adopted in an attempt to improve the rigour of the evaluation (Robson, 2002). Mental health awareness training, including the use of the video material, was delivered twice, with a total of 18 participants. The same trainer delivered the course on both occasions to staff from a combined total of four prisons. These prisons represented a cross-section of the prison estate, ranging from high security, adult male local, young offenders and a female establishment. Data was collected from the 18 participants by means of a questionnaire, which was completed on the last day of the training and returned directly to the trainer and researcher.

Data was also collected at another establishment via a focus group comprising 12 prison officers and general nurses who had undertaken the mental health awareness training a few months before but without input from the video material. This group was asked to view the video in isolation from the training and discuss its perceived effectiveness if incorporated into the training, and to comment on its accuracy. The video was played to the group with a pause after each short film for discussion, during which the researcher took field notes.

The trainer was also interviewed using an unstructured approach to elicit her personal views on the video and its effective use within the training.

Findings

Questionnaire

In total, 18 questionnaires were circulated to course participants and all were completed and returned. Questions concerning the video material were asked in conjunction with general evaluation questions about the training as a whole. Overall, the training was well received by all the participants. This included evaluation of the content, its appropriateness and the teaching skills of the trainer. Participants were asked two questions relating to the video material. The first question asked participants to give their views on its usefulness as an aid to learning and its impact on their understanding of mental health issues in prison, to which all the participants responded positively.

They all felt that the video was 'good' or 'very good' and that the four short films aided the learning during the course because it made the issues seem more real. One respondent commented:

'I think you take the information in a lot better with video clips. It seems more real when you watch it happening on video.'

They reported that the video provided more clarity and made the material more concrete. Some felt that it endorsed what they had learnt and helped them to put the theory into perspective. One respondent felt that although the video was good, the clips could have been longer. Others felt that they were short and to the point:

'Short videos were good to keep interest. The videos were hard hitting and clearly got over the point.'

One respondent was affected personally by one of the films:

'Very thought provoking. The last one left me slightly emotional but gave me a very good insight.'

Another respondent noted how the films highlighted the emotional element of mental illness in prison:

'Very good footage. Short and precise. Enough to tell a story but also put across feelings and emotions effectively.'

One respondent commented on the usefulness of the films to stimulate discussion and lighten the training:

'Very good. They [the films] brought to life the teaching part and helped to clarify each section. Helped make the course less heavy. A good talking point.'

Some respondents remarked on the accuracy and quality of the production of the films:

'Very well made videos and relevant to the subject.'

'The video clips were high quality snapshots of prison life. Whoever was responsible was obviously well-informed/experienced in prison work.'

'Really good – not cheesy. At last, a realistic vignette!'

Participants we also asked to state if they would like to have seen more, less or the same amount of video in the training. Respondents appeared to be split regarding their views on the amount of video needed. Approximately half wanted more and half wanted the same. Notably, no-one suggested that they would like to see less video footage in the training.

Focus Group

'Three On' (Reception Screening)

There were some comments regarding the accuracy and authenticity of this film. Issues such as the first time prisoner being located with the mentally ill inmate and the searching procedures were questioned. However, a non-prison officer felt it was useful to demonstrate the varying mental states of newly received prisoners. By using different prisoners with obviously different mental states, the differing levels of anxiety demonstrated by prisoners in reception were well demonstrated. Although there were some isolated comments regarding the accuracy of prison procedure in this clip, the participants recognised that it was very useful and well produced, and that it demonstrated the multi-tasking that occurs for staff working in reception and the difficult job they face. It was felt by the group that this clip would be best used towards the end of the course to stimulate discussion of issues already presented in the theoretical component of the training.

'Shut Up!' (Schizophrenia)	<p>This film clearly had a big impact on the group. There was a stunned silence when it had finished. It was felt that this film would be effective for raising awareness of prisoners experiencing auditory hallucinations. Again, one officer raised some issues about the accuracy of the actions of the prison officer in the film but the rest of the group felt that they were realistic. Overall, the group believed that this film provided an excellent demonstration of hallucinations and the difficulties faced by officers in dealing appropriately with this kind of situation. The participants felt it highlighted good practice in the way that the officer showed empathy. The group discussed the value of this film in terms of being easily related to the theoretical component of the course. Again, the group felt it would be best shown after presentation of the relevant theory module, i.e. schizophrenia, because it would be good for stimulating discussion and enhancing understanding.</p>
'Too Much' (Self Harm)	<p>This film generated emotional reactions from some of the participants. <i>'Poignant'</i> and <i>'brings a lump to the throat'</i> were responses from two of the group members. It was generally felt that this film could have been longer but that, again, it demonstrated empathy very well. Many remarked on the introduction, where the feelings of the prisoner are used as dialogue but could be applied to the prison officer who is being filmed. By using this approach at the beginning of the film, it made the participants viewing it question their own feelings. Some group members suggested that this film would provide an excellent discussion point on the <i>'slack attitudes of some staff to self-harmers'</i>.</p>
'Sweet' (Personality Disorder)	<p>Immediately after this film was shown to the group, many of the participants commented on the importance of boundary setting with prisoners. All group members remarked on how much they liked it and one stated that it was <i>'so, so real'</i>. They mentioned that it showed the <i>'flashpoint'</i> of the prisoner extremely well when he quickly turned from being 'normal' to aggressive. One officer remarked on how this film could be used effectively in jail-craft courses because it clearly shows the manipulation of staff by prisoners.</p>
Overall	<p>The focus group felt that all four films would be best used separately after the relevant theory had been taught so as to stimulate discussion and embed the theory in reality. Two officers felt that the films would be most suited to officers with some prior experience, because trainee prison officers would be exposed to some inaccuracies in prison procedure. This, however, was not the feeling of the majority. From an observer's point of view, I feel it must be noted that while the group were watching the films, they were clearly gripped by them and were totally absorbed.</p>

Unstructured Interview with the Trainer

The data collected from this interaction is useful for determining how the video material may best be used in conjunction with the training. The trainer reported that when she used the video during training, each film was used separately at the end of a relevant section of theory to demonstrate the theory in practice and to stimulate discussion. She felt that this was the most effective use of the material. She highlighted that, in all the groups which undertook the mental health awareness training with input from the video, participants always engaged in fruitful and rich discussion after viewing the films. Although there may be a couple of areas in two of the films where the accuracy of operational issues was questioned by a minority of officers, the trainer felt this does not detract from the original purpose of the film. She also mentioned that these issues tend to be localised because procedure can vary slightly from establishment to establishment. She did not think that the accuracy issues were particularly problematic, especially if the training is given to officers with some prior experience in prison.

The trainer also felt that the films should not be viewed in isolation from the training. Equally, she stressed the need for the facilitator to be aware of the potential for the material to raise some emotional feelings among the audience which need to be addressed sensitively. This is especially pertinent to the film 'Too Much'. Overall, the trainer felt that the video material was well received by all participants during training and effectively aided their learning and understanding.

Conclusions

The video material was very positively received by all staff who took part in this evaluation. Almost all those who were involved felt that their learning was definitely enhanced as a result of watching the four films. From the feedback, it appears that learning was enhanced for two main reasons. Firstly, participants were able to relate the theoretical components of the training to something visual that they could identify with, because the video was based in the prison setting. Secondly, many participants from the focus group remarked on how the films were beneficial for stimulating discussion in the group. It is anticipated that such discussion will further enhance learning in terms of participants benefitting from shared experiences.

The findings from this evaluation indicate that use of the video material needs to be carefully incorporated between the related theoretical modules. The films need to be viewed in relation to the appropriate theory to best enhance learning.

In terms of the accuracy of this material, only two prison officers commented on a couple of areas where they felt prison officer practice was incorrect. When examined in more depth with the officers and fellow members of the focus group, it was felt that these issues may have been a result of differences in local practice. As such, they were not felt to be of great significance given the actual focus and use of the video material in the context of mental health awareness training. Because other respondents in this evaluation did not highlight any inaccuracies in the films, it was not seen as a major issue. Indeed, many respondents remarked on how real and lifelike the video footage was.

Recommendations

- This video material needs to be integrated into the mental health awareness training for prison officers and should be used as part of the training rather than viewed separately.
- Trainers must be aware of the potential emotional impact of the video on course participants and be able to support participants appropriately.
- Trainers must also emphasise to course participants the main reason for including this video in the training, namely to enhance learning in the context of mental health awareness, and so may not necessarily reflect operational accuracy.

References

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