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## Press release

### **From outsider to insider Experiences of joining a York residential therapeutic community programme**

People joining a unique 32-week therapeutic programme at The Retreat in York have spoken about the mixture of emotions they experienced in a new research paper, published this month.

Clinical Psychologist Dr Julia Coakes, and colleagues Mathew Miles and Katherine Lawson from The Retreat, analysed the experience of six people joining their therapeutic community programme. The resulting paper – *'From outsider to insider: The residents' experiences of joining the Acorn programme therapeutic community'* has recently been published in the International Journal of Therapeutic Communities.

The Retreat – a not-for-profit specialist mental health provider – runs one of only four remaining residential therapeutic community treatment programmes for people with mental health problems outside a forensic setting in the UK.

#### **The Acorn therapeutic community programme at the Retreat**

This is a residential community structured to allow people to be actively involved in planning and managing their treatment. They contribute to organising the treatment programme and their daily living activities, Treatment involves work on the issues which arise in their relationships with the rest of the community.

The Retreat's Acorn Programme is a therapeutic community which treats people with personality disorders. It is a group programme with an integrative model of treatment using a combination of group and individual work, including dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT) and psychoanalytic therapies. People stay up to one year on the programme.

The 10-bedded unit cares for people who have borderline personality disorders – people who have difficulties managing their feelings and their relationships, who are impulsive and commonly use self-harm to help them cope . They may have difficulty holding on to a sense of reality at times, and have an impaired sense of identity. A subgroup of these patients have difficulties with eating.

#### **The research – what people said**

Six people were selected to take part in the analysis and the mixture of emotions they experienced during their treatment programme was explored.

Dr Coakes explained: "It is known that the emotions experienced during the programme can lead people to terminate therapy early and, although the drop out numbers at The Retreat are low, we needed to have a better understanding of this."

The results showed that people experienced a wide range of intense and sometimes painful emotions throughout the treatment programme.

One person explained: "It was just too much, I couldn't cope with all the emotions (they) just seemed to come in constant waves that overwhelmed me."

Another person described the uniqueness of The Retreat's approach: "People accepting you for who you are with all your behaviours and willing to work with you: that's not something you find in a lot of different hospitals; a lot of hospitals shy away from you or lock you up."

Three stages were identified with people going through a series of emotions from entering the programme to completing it.

The main emotions when joining the programme were found to be:

- Anxiety and fear
- Fear of judgement
- Demanding and sometimes overwhelming challenges
- Making a positive choice

Once people on the programme became a member of the community, they went through a further mixture of emotions which were summarised as:

- Desire to leave
- Determination to stay
- Being alone
- Hope
- Learning new skills
- The process being worth the distress
- Reality hitting hard
- Being left

### **Results – the way forward**

The research involved interviewing, using a semi-structured format and the data was then analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

It is hoped that publishing the results of the research will add to the limited knowledge and research in this area and help The Retreat make the joining process more successful.

The results demonstrated how difficult and painful it can be to go through this type of treatment for, but that this experience is necessary.

"You've got to go through it...it's hard but it's a necessity of the joining process.." said one person on the programme.

### **ENDS**

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